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Resilience and Adaptation in Refugee Crisis Management: Comparative Insights from the EU and ASEAN

Shazwanis Shukri,* Chih-Mei Luo**

Abstract

The European refugee crisis unfolded in the early to mid-2010s, recorded as one of the largest humanitarian challenges the continent faced in recent history. Meanwhile, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar has led to the exodus of Rohingya Muslims, seeking refuge in neighboring Bangladesh and other regional countries to escape violence and persecution. Despite differences in regional dynamics, historical contexts, and institutional frameworks, both the EU and ASEAN have grappled with significant influxes of refugees, prompting the development of various policy approaches. This paper examines the evolution of refugee policies in the EU and ASEAN in addressing these crises. It seeks to shed light on the effectiveness, disparities, and limitations of each approach, considering factors such as legal

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Chih-Mei Luo is the corresponding author of this article.

frameworks, political will, and regional cooperation. While the EU employs a centralized and collective approach, leveraging its supranational capacity for coordinated action, ASEAN's intergovernmental framework is characterized by individualistic responses and a commitment to non-interference. Although being constrained by the absence of a supranational authority, ASEAN, on occasion, successfully addressed the root causes of crises by fostering regional solidarity. Ultimately, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in crafting effective policy responses to refugee crises, while also highlighting opportunities for collaboration and learning between the EU and ASEAN.

Keywords: ASEAN, European Union, Migration, Refugee Crisis, Regional Integration

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I. Introduction

The global migration crisis has escalated to unprecedented levels, with millions of people worldwide being forcibly displaced. According to the UNHCR, by the end of 2020, approximately 82.4 million individuals had been displaced. This staggering figure includes refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs), driven from their homes by conflict, violence, persecution, and environmental disasters. By 2023, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had risen to over 103 million, the highest ever recorded. This includes around 32 million refugees, 68.3 million IDPs, and 6.9 million asylum seekers.¹

Regions such as Europe and Asia are at the forefront of this crisis, grappling with both large-scale migrations and intricate political challenges. For instance, the European refugee crisis, which peaked in the early to mid-2010s, stands as one of the most significant humanitarian challenges Europe has faced in recent history. Beginning around 2015, large numbers of refugees from Middle East and North Africa began undertaking perilous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea and overland through the Balkans to reach Europe. Similarly, the refugee crisis broke out in Asia in 2017 when Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar were forced

¹ UNHCR. *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2023*. UNHCR, (2023). <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2023>.

to flee to neighboring countries and resulted in the largest exodus in the decade.

II. The refugee crisis in Europe and Asia: an overview

The refugee crises in both Europe and Asia present multifaceted humanitarian challenges intertwined with profound geopolitical implications. In Europe, the crisis primarily unfolded in the mid-2010s, largely driven by the devastating Syrian Civil War, a conflict that began in 2011 and has had far-reaching consequences. The conflict's brutality, including bombings, chemical attacks, and widespread violence, forced large numbers of Syrians to seek refuge beyond their borders. This conflict, compounded by ongoing instability in Afghanistan and Iraq, triggered a massive influx of refugees and asylum seekers into European countries. Many fled to neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, but as the situation in these host countries became increasingly strained, many sought to move further into Europe. The UNHCR's 2023 Global Trends report indicates that by the end of 2023, the number of Afghan refugees worldwide had risen by 741,400, totaling 6.4 million.² Similarly, in Iraq, the aftermath of the Iraq War and the rise of ISIS created conditions of extreme insecurity and persecution, driving additional waves of refugees towards Europe.

² "Afghanistan Refugee Crisis Explained." UNHCR, accessed November 4, 2024.

<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/afghanistan-refugee-crisis-explained/>.

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In Asia, the refugee crisis is similarly complex and driven by a range of factors. Conflicts, persecution, and environmental disasters in several Asian countries have created significant displacement challenges. The Rohingya crisis in Myanmar is a stark example, where the military's violent crackdown on the Rohingya Muslim minority led to a massive exodus. Rohingya refugees fled to neighboring Bangladesh, which has struggled to accommodate and support one of the largest refugee populations in the world. The conditions in the refugee camps are dire, with issues such as overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, and limited access to healthcare and education. The refugee crisis in Asia also involves other regions experiencing significant displacement due to various factors. For instance, ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as environmental crises such as flooding in Bangladesh and the Philippines, contribute to the overall refugee situation in the region.

Both regions face common challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited resources for humanitarian aid, and legal ambiguities regarding refugee rights. In both Europe and Asia, addressing these crises requires comprehensive international cooperation and long-term strategies. International responses have varied, with efforts focusing on humanitarian assistance, resettlement programs, and diplomatic initiatives to address root causes of displacement. However, persistent conflicts and political complexities continue to exacerbate these crises, highlighting the

need for sustained global cooperation and innovative solutions to support refugees and manage their impact on host countries. Effective responses must balance immediate relief efforts with sustainable solutions that address both the needs of refugees and the capacities of host countries.

A. The refugee crisis in Europe

Migration has emerged as one of the most contentious issues in Europe since the end of the Cold War. Various factors contribute to the influx of migrants to Europe, including terrorism, social unrest, extreme poverty, prolonged insecurity, and authoritarian governance in their countries of origin.³ Migratory flows—whether they consist of asylum-seekers, labour migrants, or irregular migrants—have become a significant concern, posing not only a humanitarian challenge but also a security risk.⁴ Consequently, migration has increasingly been perceived as a security issue rather than merely a socio-economic one.⁵

³ Alex P. Schmid. *Links between Terrorism and Migration: An Exploration*. Netherlands: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, (2016). <https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/import/publication/Alex-P.-Schmid-Links-between-Terrorism-and-Migration-Executive-Summary.pdf>.

⁴ Derek Lutterbeck. "Policing Migration in the Mediterranean." *Mediterranean Politics*, 11, no.1, (2006):59-82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629390500490411>.

⁵ Stefania Panebianco. *Dealing with Maritime Security in the Mediterranean Basin: The EU as a Multilateral Actor*. Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, (2010). <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai1016.pdf>.

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Over the past few years, the refugee crisis in Europe has arisen from both land and sea routes, with each route presenting distinct challenges and contributing factors to the broader crisis. For land routes, conflict and instability in countries like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan have led to large-scale displacement of people, many of whom initially seek refuge in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. However, as the situations in these host countries become increasingly strained due to the sheer number of refugees and limited resources, many individuals and families embark on perilous journeys through various land routes to reach Europe. Nevertheless, recent years have seen a notable increase in refugee movements via sea routes, which is particularly alarming and concerning. The Mediterranean Sea, in particular, has served as a primary pathway for refugees and migrants aiming to reach Europe, predominantly from North Africa and the Middle East. The hazardous voyage across the Mediterranean, often conducted in overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels, has led to numerous tragedies, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives at sea.

Migration through the Mediterranean Sea follows three primary patterns or trends. The first, and currently the most prominent, is the Eastern Mediterranean route, which involves migration flows from North African countries to southern Europe, particularly Italy, Greece, and Turkey. Migrants using this route typically come from countries like Syria, Afghanistan, and

Somalia.⁶ The second pattern, known as the Western Mediterranean route, traditionally involves migration from Morocco and Algeria to Spain, often via Melilla and Ceuta. However, recent instability and conflict in sub-Saharan Africa have led to a surge in migrants departing from countries such as Syria, Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, Mali, Chad, and the Central African Republic. In 2015, Syrian migrants were the largest group arriving in Europe through this route (Ibid.). The third pattern is the Central Mediterranean route, with popular destinations being Italy and Malta. Migrants following this path often originate from Libya, Syria, Tunisia, Somalia, Nigeria, Eritrea, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana. In 2014, over 170,000 migrants arrived on the island of Lampedusa, a movement linked to political unrest in Libya and the Syrian civil war.⁷ Most irregular migrants arriving in Italy are "economic migrants" seeking better job opportunities, while those from Eritrea are typically asylum seekers fleeing persecution under an oppressive regime.

In recent years, the Mediterranean Sea has seen a significant number of accidents and shipwrecks involving irregular migrants and refugees attempting to reach Europe by sea. One of the most

⁶ "Greece and Italy Continued to Face Unprecedented Number of Migrants in December." Frontex, accessed November 4, 2024.

<https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/greece-and-italy-continued-to-face-unprecedented-number-of-migrants-in-december-0BbBRd>.

⁷ "Migrant Arrivals by Sea in Italy Top 170,000 in 2014." IOM, accessed November 4, 2024.

<https://www.iom.int/news/migrant-arrivals-sea-italy-top-170000-2014>.

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tragic incidents occurred in April 2015, when the deadliest shipwreck in the region's history claimed the lives of more than 800 people en route to Europe.⁸ The frequent shipwrecks and the exploitation of migrants by traffickers have drawn considerable attention, particularly from the EU. Although several traffickers are apprehended each year, human trafficking remains a persistent and dangerous business in the Mediterranean, leading to thousands of deaths annually.

This irregular migration across the Mediterranean has become one of Europe's most pressing challenges, with migrant movements reaching levels not seen since World War II⁹ and, accordingly, has placed unprecedented strain on European coastal and rescue operations. EU countries have struggled to manage the rapid increase in the irregular migrant population over a short period. This incident served as a stark wake-up call for the EU to take more active roles in addressing the migrant crisis and combating human trafficking. As a result, tackling migrant smuggling has become a top priority on the EU's political agenda, forming a critical part of their strategy to manage irregular migration across the sea.

⁸ "The World's Deadliest Sea Crossing." Amnesty International UK, accessed November 4, 2024.

<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/worlds-deadliest-sea-crossing-mediterranean>.

⁹ Michael J. McNerney, Giacomo Persi Paoli, and Sarah Grand-Clement. *Cross-cutting Challenges and Their Implications for the Mediterranean Region*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, (2017).

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE222.html>.

B. The refugee crisis in Southeast Asia

In addition to the European region, Southeast Asia has also been grappling with irregular migration and refugee issues for several decades. The refugee crisis in Southeast Asia is a multifaceted humanitarian challenge, characterized by various factors such as conflict, persecution, natural disasters, and economic instability. While Southeast Asia is not traditionally associated with large refugee populations compared to other regions, such as the Middle East or Africa, it nevertheless faces significant displacement issues. Some of the main migration routes in Southeast Asia originate from Myanmar (particularly the Rohingya), Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, with destinations primarily being Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh often use small, overcrowded boats to cross the Andaman Sea towards the shores of Malaysia and Thailand. These journeys are frequently perilous, with many vessels encountering difficulties and sinking mid-journey.

Similar to Europe, migration routes in Southeast Asia are often linked to human trafficking networks that exploit migrants. Due to limitations such as the lack of travel and identification documents, migrants especially from Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Somalia rely on these smuggling networks to reach their destination countries in search of employment opportunities in low-wage sectors. However, these migrants are often exploited by

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traffickers, subjected to exorbitant fees, and treated with cruelty, including torture, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation.¹⁰

Neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia have long served as host nations for Rohingya refugees seeking a better life after fleeing atrocities in their home country. To date, more than 100,000 Rohingya refugees have been registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Malaysia.¹¹ Between 2012 and 2015, Malaysia received a significant number of Rohingya refugees arriving by boat, with nearly 100,000 refugees making the perilous journey across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea.¹² While the number of refugees in Indonesia remains relatively small, Thailand has increasingly become a preferred transit destination for Rohingya refugees before their relocation to a third country. Consequently, Malaysia has become the host country with the highest number of Rohingya refugees among ASEAN member states.

The mass exodus in 2017 significantly worsened the crisis, as nearly 700,000 Rohingya fled their homes seeking safety

¹⁰ Shazwanis Shukri. "The Rohingya refugee crisis in Southeast Asia: ASEAN's role and way forward." *Journal of International Studies*, 17, (2021):239-263. <https://doi.org/10.32890/jis2021.17.10>.

¹¹ "Figures at a Glance in Malaysia." UNHCR Malaysia, accessed November 4, 2024. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-my/figures-at-a-glance-in-malaysia.html>.

¹² Shukri, "The Rohingya refugee crisis in Southeast Asia," 239-263.

following clashes with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).¹³ The majority of these refugees found shelter in Bangladesh, while others endured long, dangerous journeys by sea to neighboring countries. Since the outbreak of violence, Bangladesh has been the main destination for Rohingya refugees, with many residing in the Cox's Bazar refugee camps.¹⁴ Over 900,000 refugees are currently living in these overcrowded camps, which face severe challenges, including poor sanitation, unsafe water, a high risk of disease, and exposure to human trafficking and sexual exploitation.¹⁵

Throughout 2020, Malaysia frequently prevented Rohingya refugees from landing on its shores. Several boats arriving from Bangladesh carrying Rohingya migrants were turned away by Malaysian authorities as part of their efforts to strengthen border controls and prevent the spread of COVID-19. In April 2020, the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) intercepted and turned away a boat carrying over 200 refugees near

¹³ Eleanor Albert and Lindsay Maizland. "The Rohingya Crisis." *Foreign Affairs*. January 23, (2020).

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis>.

¹⁴ Hossain Ahmed Taufiq. "Rohingya Refugee Crisis and the State of Insecurity in Bangladesh," in *Genocide and Mass Violence: Politics of Singularity*, Imtiaz Ahmed, eds. Centre for Genocide Studies: University of Dhaka, (2019):145-180.

¹⁵ Md. Mahbubur Rahman, Haradhan Kumar Mohajan, and Tripty Kana Bose.

"Future of Rohingyas: Dignified Return to Myanmar or Restoring Their Rights or Both." *IKAT: The Indonesian Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 4, no.2, (2021):145-170. <https://doi.org/10.22146/ikat.v4i2.57706>.

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Langkawi.¹⁶ Two months later, Malaysian coastguards detected two boats with hundreds of refugees off the coast of Langkawi. The first boat, carrying 269 refugees, was believed to have been adrift at sea for weeks under dire conditions. The detainees were taken to the Kem Bina Negara center in Langkawi before being sent back to sea. The second boat, carrying around 300 refugees, was reported to have drifted near the Thai coast without approaching Langkawi. According to Malaysian authorities, 22 boats carrying Rohingya refugees were prevented from entering the country's shores in 2020 alone, as part of efforts to manage irregular migration. The number of migrants arriving by sea to Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries has reportedly decreased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the period from 2022 to 2023, UNHCR recorded nearly 9,000 Rohingya refugees attempting to travel by sea, primarily smuggled by human trafficking networks and involving more than 80 boats. Of these refugees, 30% were children, 28% were women, and 42% were men. Nearly 49% of these refugees were recorded as originating from Bangladesh, while 39% came from Myanmar, with the remainder from other countries.¹⁷ These

¹⁶ Christine H. Kim. *Challenges to the Rohingya Population in Malaysia*. Center for Strategic & International Studies, (2021). <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/challenges-rohingya-population-malaysia>.

¹⁷ UNODC. *Migrant Smuggling in Southeast Asia*. Vienna: UNODC, (2024). https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glossom/Observatory/2024/ObservatorySOM_SEA_ResearchBrief.pdf.

refugees were intercepted before they could land on the shores of Malaysia and Indonesia and were subsequently returned to their countries of origin. This figure represents a significant and notable increase in Rohingya refugees attempting to escape by sea compared to previous years.

III. EU and ASEAN responses to refugee crisis

The EU and the ASEAN are regional organizations that play crucial roles in addressing humanitarian challenges, including refugee crises. The management of refugee crises presents a profound challenge for both EU and ASEAN. Both entities face pressures stemming from geopolitical instability, conflicts, and humanitarian emergencies that drive refugee flows. Despite these common challenges, the EU and ASEAN adopt distinct policy frameworks shaped by their unique institutional structures, historical contexts, and regional dynamics, though their approaches differ significantly. The EU has established common asylum policies, legal frameworks, and mechanisms for burden-sharing among member states, although implementation challenges and political disagreements have surfaced. ASEAN, characterized by its principle of non-intervention and sovereignty, relies on informal cooperation and dialogue rather than binding agreements to address refugee issues.

Understanding these backgrounds is essential for analyzing the similarities and divergences in policy approaches between the

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EU and ASEAN concerning refugee crises. Through a nuanced exploration of policy similarities and divergences, this comparative analysis aims to elucidate how these regional organizations navigate humanitarian challenges, contribute to global refugee management efforts, and shape regional responses to displacement crises.

A. The EU responses

Since 2015, the Mediterranean Sea has witnessed a dramatic escalation in irregular migration, underscoring a severe humanitarian crisis that has triggered significant international concern. The surge in migration flows, driven by conflict, persecution, and economic instability, has turned the Mediterranean into one of the most dangerous routes for migrants. The escalating crisis has prompted the European Union to undertake comprehensive efforts to address the situation, including enhanced border enforcement, tackling human smuggling and trafficking networks, providing humanitarian aid, promoting the equitable distribution of responsibilities among member states and the implementation of extensive maritime operations. Initiatives such as Operation Triton and Operation Sophia have been launched to improve search and rescue capabilities, strengthen border controls, and disrupt smuggling networks. These operations aim not only to mitigate the immediate risks associated with irregular migration but also to

address the broader challenges of managing and integrating migrants. The EU's multifaceted response reflects a commitment to both protecting human lives and addressing the complex dynamics of migration, though challenges persist in balancing humanitarian objectives with security concerns.

**(A) European Agency for the Management of
Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of
the Member States of the European Union (Frontex)**

One of the notable efforts by the EU to address irregular migration is the creation of Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, established in May 2005. Frontex was initially set up to coordinate cooperation at the external borders of EU member states, but its role has significantly expanded in response to the Mediterranean migration crisis that began in 2015. The agency has conducted several joint operations, including Hera, Nautilus, and Triton, which focus primarily on the Central Mediterranean to assist member states facing high volumes of irregular migrants. Additionally, the EU launched the EUROSUR surveillance system in 2013 to enhance situational awareness and improve maritime safety. In 2015, the EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia was introduced to combat human trafficking at sea.

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Frontex was established in response to the recognized connection between migration, border security, and terrorism. On September 20, 2001, the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council urged the Commission to urgently explore the interplay between ensuring internal security and meeting international protection obligations.¹⁸ This call highlighted the perceived link between migration, asylum, and security, emphasizing that inadequate control over undocumented migration could compromise state security and heighten the risk of terrorism.¹⁹ Consequently, Frontex adopted the concept of ‘integrated border management,’ which focuses on enhancing coordination among member states’ public authorities. This approach prioritizes comprehensive border surveillance, including border checks and risk analysis.²⁰

(B) Operation Joint Triton

Another notable Frontex initiative is the Joint Operation Triton, which was officially launched in November 2014 as a successor to the Mare Nostrum Operation. Initially, the operation’s

¹⁸ “Council Framework Decision on the European Arrest Warrant and the Surrender Procedures between the Member States.” Council of the European Union, accessed November 4, 2024.

https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec_framw/2002/584/oj.

¹⁹ Andrew W. Neal. “Securitization and Risk at the EU Border: The Origins of Frontex.” *Journal Compilation*, 47, no.2, (2009):333-356.

²⁰ Sarah Leonard. “EU Border Security and Migration into the European Union: Frontex and Securitisation through Practices.” *European Security*, 19, no.2, (2010):231-254.

monthly costs were approximately 2.9 million euros, but these expenses surged to 26.25 million euros by 2015.²¹ Initially, JO Triton was limited to operating within 30 nautical miles of the Italian coast, but its area of operation was later expanded to 138 nautical miles south of Sicily.²² The primary objectives of JO Triton included providing critical assistance and support for search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea, particularly aiding Italian authorities, as well as enhancing border surveillance capabilities. Additionally, the operation aimed to address the increasing irregular migration flows in the Central Mediterranean.

Furthermore, JO Triton also engaged in a secondary line of activity within the ‘hotspot’ areas. The ‘hotspot’ concept, introduced by the European Commission in 2015, was designed to offer assistance to member states dealing with the migration crisis. JO Triton primarily focuses on border surveillance, but its mandate extends beyond this core function to offer substantial support in addressing various forms of cross-border crime. In addition to monitoring and securing maritime borders, JO Triton assists member states in combating related criminal activities such as human trafficking, smuggling, and irregular migration. This comprehensive approach involves coordinating with national authorities to enhance their capabilities in intelligence gathering, risk assessment, and operational response. By providing logistical

²¹ Roberta Mungianu, *Frontex and Non-Refoulement: The International Responsibility of the EU*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2016).

²² Mungianu, *Frontex and Non-Refoulement*.

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support, expertise, and resources, JO Triton aims to strengthen the overall effectiveness of member states in managing and mitigating security threats associated with cross-border crime, thus contributing to broader regional stability and safety.

This operation encompasses the territorial waters of Italy and extends to search and rescue (SAR) operations for both Italy and Malta.²³ Frontex supports Italian authorities by gathering and disseminating vital intelligence on criminal networks, particularly those operating in Libya and other transit countries. Additionally, coastal patrol boats are frequently deployed to address smaller-scale interventions and conduct boardings of suspicious vessels at sea. In 2015, JO Triton achieved a significant milestone by rescuing over 3,000 migrants in the Mediterranean Sea during its search and rescue operations.²⁴ The migrants, primarily from Sub-Saharan Africa, were making perilous journeys to Italy aboard overcrowded inflatable boats, often carrying more than 100 individuals. These vessels were highly vulnerable to shipwrecks and drowning, underscoring the critical importance of JO Triton's efforts in mitigating the risks faced by these migrants at sea.

²³ "Frontex Joint Operation 'Triton' – Concerted efforts to manage migration in the Central Mediterranean." European Commission, accessed November 4, 2024. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_14_566.

²⁴ "Assets Deployed in Operation Triton Involved in Saving 3,000 Migrants since Friday." Frontex, Accessed November 4, 2024. <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/assets-deployed-in-operation-triton-involved-in-saving-3-000-migrants-since-friday-xmtkwU>.

(C) EUNAVFOR MED- Operation Sophia

In response to the catastrophic shipwreck off the Libyan coast in April 2015, which claimed nearly 800 lives, the European Union swiftly launched its naval mission, EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia (referred to as Operation Sophia). Established on June 22, 2015, the operation was tasked with the mandate to "identify, capture, and dispose of vessels, as well as assets used or suspected of being used by migrant smugglers or traffickers." The primary goal was to contribute to broader EU efforts aimed at dismantling the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks operating in the Southern Central Mediterranean Sea.²⁵ While the primary mandate of Operation Sophia is to target human smugglers and traffickers, it also carries a critical legal obligation under international law to conduct search and rescue operations. This responsibility ensures that the operation not only focuses on disrupting smuggling and trafficking networks but also actively engages in rescuing individuals at sea, thereby fulfilling its humanitarian duties.

The operation was initiated just one month after the Council of the European Union decided on May 18, 2016, to launch a military intervention for international law enforcement. This swift implementation demonstrates the EU member states' effective

²⁵ Ruxandra-Laura Boşilcă, Matthew Stenberg, and Marianne Riddervold. "Copying in EU security and defence policies: the case of EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia," *European Security*, 30, no.2, (2021):218-236.

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solidarity in addressing the migration crisis and combating human smuggling and criminal networks at sea. On June 26, 2016, the first vessels of Operation Sophia commenced operations in the Central Mediterranean. The operation's primary objectives are to provide immediate search and rescue responses, minimize loss of life at sea, prevent the spread of human smuggling activities, and disrupt traffickers' networks.²⁶ Additionally, Operation Sophia aims to tackle the root causes of irregular migration, such as poverty, political instability, and civil conflict, through collaboration with countries of origin and transit.

Operation Sophia made notable strides in its initial year of operation, achieving a 9% reduction in migration flows via the central Mediterranean route to Italy and Malta, marking the first decrease in three years. By October 2015, just four months into the operation, it advanced to its second phase, Phase 2A (High Seas), shifting its focus to counter-smuggling efforts.²⁷ By July 2016, statistics indicated that Operation Sophia had successfully rescued a substantial number of irregular migrants and apprehended numerous smugglers using the resources and assets of the operation.

²⁶ Thierry Tardy. *Operation Sophia: Tackling the refugee crisis with military means*. European Union Institute for Security Studies, (2015).

https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/193999/Brief_30_Operation_Sophia.pdf.

²⁷ Boşilcă, Stenberg, and Riddervold, "Copying in EU security and defence policies," 218-236.

Despite its successes, Operation Sophia has faced notable challenges in executing its maritime operations. Key issues include time constraints and operational speed, exacerbated by the lack of a permanent naval command structure and fleet. Instead, participating vessels are provided by member states on a rotating basis, which can hinder the operation's effectiveness. Nonetheless, Operation Sophia's consistent patrolling of international waters has significantly disrupted smuggling networks, particularly those based in Libya. This persistent presence has hindered smuggling activities in the high seas and contributed to a reduction in the number of irregular migrants departing from Libyan shores.

B. The ASEAN responses

The Rohingya refugee crisis has been further complicated by the reactions of several Southeast Asian countries. In 2015, both Malaysia and Thailand refused entry to boats carrying thousands of Rohingya refugees during what became known as the "boat people" exodus.²⁸ Both nations were concerned that accepting the refugees would lead to an even greater influx.²⁹ Their decision to turn the boats away was met with strong criticism from the

²⁸ Antje Missbach, and Gunnar Stange. "Muslim Solidarity and the Lack of Effective Protection for Rohingya Refugees in Southeast Asia," *Social Sciences* 10, no.5, (2021):166-182. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10050166>.

²⁹ Sebastien Moretti. "Between refugee protection and migration management: the quest for coordination between UNHCR and IOM in the Asia-Pacific region," *Third World Quarterly* 42, no.1, (2020):34-51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1780910>.

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UNHCR and human rights organizations, which urged Southeast Asian countries to provide humanitarian aid rather than leaving the refugees stranded at sea.³⁰ Following intense international pressure and media attention, Malaysia and Indonesia eventually allowed the refugees to land temporarily, offering them food, water, and shelter.³¹ However, Thailand continued to deny entry to Rohingya boats.

As founding members of ASEAN, Malaysia and Indonesia have taken active roles in supporting Rohingya Muslims and advocating for their basic human rights amidst the oppression by the Myanmar government. Although neither country is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, both have consistently shown solidarity with the Rohingya. This reflects their ‘constructive engagement’ approach within the ASEAN framework in addressing the crisis. Despite their individual efforts, Malaysia and Indonesia have called for stronger collective cooperation within ASEAN to apply more pressure in resolving the issue.³² However, Malaysia has shifted from a stance of

³⁰ “Malaysia: Allow Rohingya Refugees Ashore.” Human Rights Watch, accessed November 4, 2024.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/18/malaysia-allow-rohingya-refugees-ashore>.

³¹ Straits Times. “Malaysia, Indonesia agree to provide temporary shelter to boat people,” *Straits Times*, May 20, (2015).
<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-indonesia-agree-to-provide-temporary-shelter-to-boat-people>.

³² Noel M. Morada, “Asean and the Rakhine Crisis: Balancing Non-interference, Accountability, and Strategic Interests in Responding to

sympathy to a more stringent approach, refusing to accept Rohingya refugees, pushing them back to sea, or detaining them as ‘illegal migrants’.³³ Under Malaysia’s Immigration Act, those entering the country illegally face fines of no less than RM10,000, imprisonment for up to five years, and up to six strokes of whipping.³⁴ These harsh measures have been criticized by human rights organizations, which have called for the release of detainees and urged ASEAN to take a more proactive role in safeguarding the refugees’ rights. ASEAN’s timely intervention is critical to addressing the refugee crisis before it escalates into a larger security issue for the region. The international community and human rights groups are closely monitoring ASEAN’s efforts to resolve this ongoing humanitarian crisis.

ASEAN is often viewed as a regional organization lacking a comprehensive framework to address one of the world’s largest refugee crises.³⁵ Despite numerous discussions among its members, the organization has yet to reach a common consensus or

Atrocities in Myanmar,” *Global Responsibility to Protect* 13, no.2, (2021):131-157. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1875-984X-13020003>.

³³ Missbach and Stange, “Muslim Solidarity and the Lack of Effective Protection,” 166-182.

³⁴ “Malaysia: Stop plans to cane Rohingya refugees and release those already imprisoned.” Amnesty International, accessed November 4, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/malaysia-stop-plans-to-cane-rohingya-refugees-and-release-those-already-imprisoned/>

³⁵ Missbach and Stange, “Muslim Solidarity and the Lack of Effective Protection,” 166-182.

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develop a robust mechanism to tackle the Rohingya crisis.³⁶ Within ASEAN, Malaysia has consistently pushed for continued pressure on Myanmar to protect the Rohingya from persecution.³⁷ While some members advocate for regional cooperation, Myanmar has maintained that the Rohingya issue is an internal matter, insisting it be resolved without external intervention. Myanmar's de jure leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, rejected international accusations of genocide in Rakhine State, labelling the violence as an "internal armed conflict" caused by Rohingya extremists.³⁸ The Myanmar government has asserted that any alleged war crimes in Rakhine would be handled through its national justice system. The outspoken stances of Malaysia and Indonesia have, however, prompted Myanmar to recognize the refugee crisis as a regional concern, opening the door to ASEAN's involvement, albeit in a limited capacity.³⁹ Additionally, ASEAN has encouraged Myanmar to engage with the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, as part of efforts to find a peaceful resolution.

³⁶ Rebecca Barber and Sarah Teitt. "The Rohingya Crisis: Can ASEAN Salvage Its Credibility?" *Survival* 62, no.5, (2020):41-54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2020.1819642>.

³⁷ Morada, "Asean and the Rakhine Crisis," 131-157.

³⁸ BBC. "Myanmar Rohingya: Government rejects ICJ ruling," *BBC*, January 23,(2020). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51229796>.

³⁹ Moe Thuzar. "Repatriating the Rohingya: What Regional Cooperation Can and Cannot Do," *ISEAS Perspective*, September 13, (2019).

Since most ASEAN members are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the organization lacks a comprehensive political and legal framework to address the Rohingya crisis effectively. Only Cambodia and the Philippines are parties to the convention, while the remaining member states have no legal obligation to acknowledge or protect the rights of refugees and migrants.⁴⁰ However, all ASEAN members are bound by the principle of non-refoulement under international customary law, which prohibits the return of refugees to places where they face danger. Strengthening regional cooperation is crucial to tackling the refugee crisis, which has escalated into a significant humanitarian issue, affecting not only Myanmar but also having broader regional implications. Although ASEAN's core principle of "non-interference in the internal affairs of member states" remains central, its members recognize the urgency of addressing the Rohingya issue. ASEAN holds annual ministerial meetings, attended by all 10 foreign ministers, to discuss political and security concerns in the region, including the violence against the Rohingya minority.⁴¹ Despite ASEAN's efforts, Myanmar has historically resisted including the Rohingya crisis on the ASEAN

⁴⁰ Yoo Jeong Jeong. "Diverging Response to the Rohingya Refugee Crisis since 2017 Military Crackdown: Comparative Analysis of Bangladesh and Malaysia," *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 19, no.1, (2021):133-165. <https://doi.org/10.14731/kjis.2021.04.19.1.133>.

⁴¹ Irawan Jati. "Comparative Study of the Roles of ASEAN and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Responding to the Rohingya Crisis," *The Indonesian Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 1, no.1, (2017):17-32. <https://doi.org/10.22146/ikat.v1i1.27466>.

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agenda. However, in recent years, Myanmar's position has gradually shifted, showing increased cooperation in response to growing international pressure and criticism.⁴²

(A) ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR)

Despite the fact that most ASEAN member states have not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, the organization remains committed to safeguarding human rights and freedoms as outlined in its charter. A key principle of the ASEAN Charter underscores the responsibility to protect human rights:⁴³

“Respect for fundamental freedoms, the promotion and protection of human rights and the promotion of social justice, as well as the rule of law and good governance”

ASEAN reaffirms its dedication to upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and ensuring the protection of fundamental human rights for all individuals in the region. Through the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD), member states are bound by principles that include the right to

⁴² Thuzar, “Repatriating the Rohingya.”

⁴³ “ASEAN Human Rights Declaration.” ASEAN, accessed November 4, 2024. <https://asean.org/asean-human-rights-declaration/>

freedom of movement and the right to seek and receive asylum.⁴⁴ Adopted in 2012, the AHRD reflects the commitment of ASEAN nations to prioritize human rights for the peoples of ASEAN, including the Rohingya. Additionally, the AHRD recognizes the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) as the primary regional body tasked with promoting and safeguarding human rights across the region.⁴⁵

The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) functions as the region's primary human rights institution, tasked with promoting and protecting the rights of ASEAN citizens in line with its Terms of Reference (ToR).⁴⁶ AICHR's objectives are twofold: reinforcing ASEAN member states' obligation to uphold human rights while adhering to the principle of non-interference outlined in the ASEAN Charter.⁴⁷ Though the AHRD and AICHR frameworks offer a platform for addressing the Rohingya crisis, AICHR has struggled to effectively promote the rights of the Rohingya. The principle of non-interference has further complicated efforts to find a resolution. ASEAN continues to lack a binding framework or

⁴⁴ ASEAN. *ASEAN Human Rights Declaration*. ASEAN, (2013).

https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/6_AHRD_Booklet.pdf

⁴⁵ ASEAN, *ASEAN Human Rights Declaration*.

⁴⁶ Saovane Kaewjullakarn and Lalin Kovudhikulrungsri. "What Legal Measures Should ASEAN Apply to Help the Rohingya?" *South East Asia Journal of Contemporary Business, Economics and Law* 6, no.4, (2015):6-14.

⁴⁷ Barber and Teitt. "The Rohingya Crisis" 41-54.

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policy that would compel member states to take decisive action or make concrete recommendations to protect Rohingya refugees.⁴⁸

(B) ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM)

As stipulated in the ASEAN Charter, member states are obligated to abstain from interfering in the internal affairs of fellow member nations. Due to this principle of non-interference, ASEAN has not convened any formal meetings specifically to address the Rohingya crisis.⁴⁹ Myanmar's resistance to discussing the issue within the ASEAN framework has further stalled efforts by other members to take collective action. Between 2012 and 2015, at the height of the Rohingya crisis, ASEAN only held two meetings on the matter.⁵⁰ The first took place in May 2015 in Putrajaya, involving Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. This meeting followed intense international criticism after these nations turned away Rohingya refugees stranded at sea.⁵¹ The talks led to a positive outcome, with Malaysia and Indonesia agreeing to temporarily allow the refugees to land and providing them with essential humanitarian aid, such as food, water, and shelter, with plans for repatriation

⁴⁸ Jati. "Comparative Study of the Roles of ASEAN and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation," 17-32.

⁴⁹ Richa Shivakoti. "ASEAN's role in the Rohingya refugee crisis," *Forced Migration Review*. October, (2017). <https://www.fmreview.org/shivakoti/>

⁵⁰ Jati. "Comparative Study of the Roles of ASEAN and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation," 17-32.

⁵¹ Moretti. "Between refugee protection and migration management" 34-51.

within a year.⁵² However, Thailand maintained its stance, continuing to refuse entry to any Rohingya boats approaching its shores.⁵³

In July 2015, ASEAN convened a special ministerial meeting to address the growing issue of transnational crime, prompted by the discovery of mass graves in Wang Kelian, a town on the Malaysia-Thailand border.⁵⁴ These graves contained the remains of Rohingya individuals who had fallen victim to human trafficking networks operating between Bangladesh and Myanmar.⁵⁵ This discovery elevated human trafficking to a critical concern within ASEAN. The ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) was subsequently held to tackle the increasing threat posed by trafficking in persons, which had broader regional implications. As ASEAN Chair in 2015, Malaysia emphasized the need for unified cooperation among member states to develop a collective response to this issue.⁵⁶ The meeting marked a turning point, with ASEAN taking a more

⁵² Hoang Thi Ha and Ye Htut. "Rakhine Crisis Challenges ASEAN's Non-Interference Principle," *Perspective*, 70, (2016).

⁵³ Aizat Khairi. "The Dilemma of Rohingya Refugees 'Boat People': The Role of Malaysia, its Neighbors and ASEAN," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 6, no.12, (2016):481-489. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v6-i12/2512>.

⁵⁴ Ha and Htut, "Rakhine Crisis Challenges," 70.

⁵⁵ Missbach and Stange, "Muslim Solidarity and the Lack of Effective Protection," 166-182.

⁵⁶ Jati. "Comparative Study of the Roles of ASEAN and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation," 17-32.

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active and assertive stance on human trafficking, while also addressing the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis.

These regional developments prompted Myanmar to reassess its stance and gradually adopt a more cooperative approach within the ASEAN framework. In 2016, following persistent requests and pressure from Malaysia, Aung San Suu Kyi hosted an informal meeting with ASEAN Foreign Ministers in Yangon. This meeting aimed to update ASEAN member states on the situation in Rakhine State.⁵⁷ The meeting yielded several positive outcomes: Myanmar committed to providing regular updates on the situation in Rakhine and enhancing coordination and cooperation within the ASEAN framework. Additionally, Myanmar permitted humanitarian relief efforts and access to the ASEAN member states in Rakhine State, though the extent of ASEAN's active role in the conflict remained unclear.⁵⁸ The Myanmar government also allowed journalists limited access to northern Rakhine's Maungdaw under strict conditions, a move made in response to international criticism and allegations of the government manipulating the situation in Rakhine. Furthermore, Myanmar sought to refute accusations from Rohingya refugees who had fled to Bangladesh, denying claims of deliberate violence and destruction perpetrated by the Myanmar military against the Rohingya Muslims.

⁵⁷ Shivakoti, "ASEAN's role in the Rohingya refugee crisis."

⁵⁸ Ha and Htut, "Rakhine Crisis Challenges," 70.

Adhering to the fundamental principles of sovereignty and non-interference enshrined in the ASEAN Charter, ASEAN's ability to take a proactive role in the Rohingya refugee crisis is inherently constrained. The ASEAN member states most directly impacted by the crisis—Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand—have taken significant steps to address the immediate needs of the refugees, striving to provide both temporary and, where possible, long-term solutions. Additionally, some ASEAN members have sought external cooperation with partners such as the United States and Australia to tackle the issue. Despite these efforts, critics argue that ASEAN member states continue to rely heavily on the principle of non-interference, limiting their effectiveness. The Rohingya crisis poses a significant challenge for ASEAN, testing its capacity for regional cooperation and problem-solving. While ASEAN's current role in addressing the Rohingya issue is limited, there are expectations for a more proactive stance in the near future.

IV. CONTRASTING APPROACHES TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT: ASEAN vs EU

Due to their fundamentally different organizational structures, the EU and ASEAN have exhibited contrasting approaches to managing refugee crises. These divergent strategies are reflected in their allocation of organizational resources, the frameworks they employ, and their respective effectiveness in addressing the challenges posed by such crises.

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First, the EU adopted a centralized and collective approach, in contrast to ASEAN's intergovernmental and individualistic response. As the world's most advanced model of regional integration and a supranational entity, the EU was able to deploy a wide array of policy instruments and resources to address the refugee crisis. Despite internal contentions among member states regarding specific policy responses to the refugee crisis, the EU demonstrated consistent, coordinated actions, such as Operation Triton and Operation Sophia. These efforts reflected the EU's capacity for synchronized and collective responses. In contrast, ASEAN, as an intergovernmental platform designed for regional cooperation without the aim of deeper policy integration, adhered to its foundational principle of non-interference. Refugee issues are often framed as domestic security or humanitarian concerns rather than as shared regional responsibilities. This limited its ability to enact coordinated regional solutions. Instead, ASEAN relied on informal, country-specific efforts to influence the state of origin of the crisis, operating within a less institutionalized framework. Such influence exertion was circumstantial, depending on the willingness and cooperation of the crisis country. As a result, ASEAN was unable to deliver any coordinated, collective policy actions throughout the crisis.

Second, for the EU, the refugee crisis stemmed primarily from external sources, while the crises faced by ASEAN were often generated by its own member states. This distinction helps

to explain why the EU was able to mobilize assertive and collective actions relatively swiftly as external crises were easier to rally unification. In contrast, crises arising from within the group tend to spark internal divisions and inconsistent responses, influenced by a range of political considerations that limit the room for maneuver. The challenges faced by Malaysia in crafting a unified ASEAN response to the Rohingya crisis illustrate not only the intergovernmental nature and limited capacity of ASEAN but also the stakeholder dynamics and political sensitivities inherent in such crises. These complexities hindered the organization's ability to present a cohesive front in addressing the situation effectively.

Third, while external crises can indeed prompt unified and effective responses from the EU, they can also pose constraints on policy effectiveness. Since the crises originate outside the EU, the policy actions taken are often unilateral and primarily aimed at alleviating immediate suffering, rather than addressing the underlying issues within the crisis-affected country. Consequently, these measures may only serve to mitigate the tragedy in the short term, without addressing the root causes. In contrast, a crisis emanating from within an ASEAN member state presents both limitations and opportunities for the organization. Although ASEAN is significantly constrained by its limited capacity and institutional resources compared to the EU, it also possesses the potential to tackle the underlying causes of the refugee crisis,

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provided there is willingness and cooperation from the member state involved. For instance, with Myanmar's cooperation, ASEAN has been able to address the fundamental issues contributing to the refugee crisis, facilitating the provision of humanitarian aid in the Rakhine region and securing Myanmar's commitment to coordinate efforts within the ASEAN framework. Such cooperative arrangements would be considerably more challenging to establish if the crisis were originating from a non-member state.

Fourth, cultural and socio-economic factors unquestionably play a pivotal role in shaping refugee crisis management in both the EU and ASEAN. Culturally, the EU is anchored in a rights-based tradition rooted in post-war humanitarian principles and international legal instruments such as the 1951 Refugee Convention. This foundation has supported the development of regional frameworks like the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which seeks to harmonize asylum standards across member states. However, public attitudes toward refugees vary considerably across the EU, influenced by historical experiences with migration, national identity narratives, and religious dynamics. Countries such as Germany and Sweden have adopted more inclusive policies, driven by multicultural ideals, whereas others like Hungary and Poland have framed refugees, particularly Muslims, as threats to national culture and

identity.⁵⁹⁶⁰ Rising Islamophobia and populist narratives have reinforced such exclusionary views, particularly since the 2015 refugee crisis.⁶¹ These cultural perceptions often influence not only public opinion but also national policy-making, leading to significant fragmentation in EU-wide solidarity and burden-sharing.

In contrast, ASEAN's cultural orientation emphasizes the principles of non-interference, state sovereignty, and regional consensus, which has hindered the development of a unified refugee protection framework.⁶² ASEAN member states also navigate complex cultural dynamics rooted in ethnic and religious diversity. For example, while Malaysia and Indonesia, both Muslim majority countries, have demonstrated some humanitarian sympathy toward the persecuted Rohingya (who are also Muslim), their support tends to be limited to temporary shelter and humanitarian assistance, stopping short of formal integration or

⁵⁹ Will Kymlicka. "Solidarity in Diverse Societies: Beyond Neoliberal Multiculturalism and Welfare Chauvinism," *Comparative Migration Studies*, 3, no. 17, (2015): 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-015-0017-4>.

⁶⁰ Anna Triandafyllidou. "A 'refugee crisis' unfolding: 'Real' events and their interpretation in media and political debates," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16, no. 1-2, (2018): 198-216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2017.1309089>.

⁶¹ Christian Dustmann et al. "Refugee migration and electoral outcomes," *The Review of Economic Studies*, 86, no. 5, (2019): 2035-2091. <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdy047>.

⁶² Sara E. Davies. "Legitimising rejection: International refugee law in Southeast Asia," *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 20, no. 3, (2008): 396-417. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/een025>.

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rights protection.⁶³ Ethnic or religious "otherness" can serve as a cultural barrier to host community acceptance, leading to exclusion, encampment, or even pushbacks in countries such as Thailand and Myanmar.⁶⁴

Fifth, socio-economic contexts further deepen these regional contrasts. The EU generally has greater institutional capacity and financial resources to support structured refugee reception and integration programs. High-income member states like Germany and the Netherlands can implement labor market integration, language training, and welfare support, although uneven economic development across the bloc complicates policy coordination.⁶⁵ Countries on the EU's external borders such as Greece and Italy often lack sufficient resources, leading to tensions over the distribution of responsibilities under mechanisms like the Dublin Regulation.⁶⁶ Economic conditions also influence public support for refugee protection. For example,

⁶³ Caitlin Wake and Tania Cheung. *Livelihood strategies of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia*. Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) Working Paper, Overseas Development Institute, (2016).
<https://odi.org/en/publications/livelihood-strategies-of-rohingya-refugees-in-malaysia/>.

⁶⁴ Alice M. Nah. *Refugee protection in Southeast Asia: Regionalism and resistance*. Routledge, (2015).

⁶⁵ OECD. *How are refugees faring on the labour market in Europe?* OECD, (2021).

<https://www.oecd.org/migration/mig/migration-policy-debates-20.pdf>.

⁶⁶ European Commission. *Europe 2020*. European Commission, (2020).
<https://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/COMPLET%20EN%20BARROSO%20%2020007%20-%20Europe%202020%20-%20EN%20version.pdf>.

during economic downturns, populist actors have successfully linked refugees to job competition and welfare strain, eroding solidarity and fueling restrictive reforms.⁶⁷

In ASEAN, socio-economic constraints are far more pronounced. Many countries in the region face limited fiscal space, weak institutional infrastructures, and high informal employment rates. These structural issues severely restrict their capacity to provide durable solutions for refugees. For instance, Malaysia, which hosts one of the largest urban refugee populations in the region, does not grant legal status to refugees, barring them from formal employment, healthcare and education.^{68,69} As a result, refugees often survive in precarious, informal labor markets, where they are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Similarly, Thailand maintains longstanding camps for refugees from Myanmar along its borders but restricts movement, access to livelihoods, and long-term integration options.⁷⁰ ASEAN states rely heavily on international organizations such as

⁶⁷ Dustmann et al., "Refugee migration and electoral outcomes," 2035-2091.

⁶⁸ UNHCR. *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022*. UNHCR, (2023).
<https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022>.

⁶⁹ Wake and Cheung, *Livelihood strategies of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia*.

⁷⁰ International Rescue Committee. *Annual Report 2019*. International Rescue Committee, (2019).

<https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/5264/irc2019-annual-report.pdf>

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UNHCR and international NGOs for refugee support, reflecting their limited domestic capacity and political will.⁷¹

In addition, European countries share contiguous borders, which makes it challenging for any single nation to remain unaffected or isolate itself from the broader refugee crisis. This interconnectedness has also shaped the EU's approach to managing refugee-related challenges. It is accurate that Europe's land borders facilitate rapid and often uncontrollable overland refugee movements, such as those witnessed during the 2015 Syrian refugee influx through the Balkan route, which overwhelmed frontline countries like Greece and Hungary and created pressures for coordinated EU action.⁷² The Schengen Area's open-border policy further complicated unilateral state responses, compelling the EU to implement collective measures like the EU-Turkey Statement and relocation quotas, despite deep political divisions.

In contrast, the maritime geography of Southeast Asia does not insulate Malaysia and Indonesia from refugee flows; rather, it shapes them differently. The Rohingya crisis is transnational by nature, with significant movements across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Unlike land borders that facilitate mass overland movements, the maritime setting imposes natural

⁷¹ Nah, *Refugee protection in Southeast Asia*.

⁷² Triandafyllidou, "A 'refugee crisis' unfolding," 198-216.

barriers that limit the scale and speed of refugee flows. As a result, the Rohingya crisis in Southeast Asia has remained relatively localized, without triggering a region-wide emergency comparable to Europe's 2015 refugee influx. Although thousands of Rohingya have arrived in Malaysia and Indonesia by boat, the scale of these movements tends to be smaller and more sporadic due to the dangers of sea crossings and the absence of established, large-scale maritime smuggling networks. Furthermore, the responses have often been ad hoc and humanitarian in nature, with both countries offering temporary shelter despite not being signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention.⁷³⁷⁴ The absence of a regional mechanism akin to the EU's Common European Asylum System has also contributed to the issue remaining relatively fragmented and contained within a few affected states.⁷⁵

Endowed with distinctly different institutional capacities and operational resources, the EU and ASEAN have demonstrated their respective strengths and weaknesses in responding to the refugee crisis. The EU's supranational approach has proven to be forceful and coherent, effectively maintaining regional stability. In contrast, ASEAN's model, characterized by intergovernmental negotiation and adaptive cooperation, tends to be more volatile and less effective in crisis management. However, ASEAN's

⁷³ Wake and Cheung, *Livelihood strategies of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia*.

⁷⁴ UNHCR. *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022*.

⁷⁵ Penelope Mathew and Tristan Harley, *Refugees, regionalism and responsibility*. Edward Elgar Publishing, (2016).

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intergovernmental approach has preserved the regional solidarity that the organization values. This solidarity can occasionally enable ASEAN to address the root causes of crises, albeit often by chance, when member states demonstrate a willingness to cooperate. Thus, while the effectiveness of ASEAN's approach may vary, its commitment to regional unity remains a critical asset in navigating complex humanitarian challenges.

V. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of EU and ASEAN policies in addressing the refugee issue reveals a complex landscape marked by distinct regional approaches shaped by historical, political, and social factors. While both organizations grapple with the challenges of managing large-scale displacement, their strategies reflect their unique contexts and operational frameworks. The EU's approach is characterized by a more structured and legally binding framework, driven by its commitment to human rights and collective responsibility. The EU's centralized and collective strategy, bolstered by its supranational authority, has allowed for swift and coordinated responses, even amid internal disagreements. The EU's emphasis on border control and integration efforts reflects its broader objective of maintaining regional stability and cohesion amidst fluctuating migration flows.

In contrast, ASEAN's intergovernmental framework, while promoting regional solidarity, has often resulted in fragmented and less effective responses due to its foundational principle of non-interference and the varying political dynamics among member states. Despite these challenges, ASEAN's ability to address the root causes of crises, when member states are willing to cooperate, highlights its potential as a regional actor. Ultimately, both organizations illustrate the importance of adapting strategies to their unique contexts and capacities, revealing valuable lessons for future humanitarian responses and the need for enhanced cooperation in addressing complex regional challenges.

The differences between the EU and ASEAN reflect broader themes in international migration policy, including the balance between national sovereignty and collective responsibility, and the challenges of implementing humanitarian standards within diverse regional contexts. The EU's more centralized and legally enforced policies contrast with ASEAN's flexible and politically sensitive approach, underscoring the varying ways in which regions navigate complex migration dynamics.

Understanding these differences is crucial for developing more effective and cohesive responses to global refugee crises. It highlights the need for enhanced international cooperation, adaptable frameworks, and a shared commitment to humanitarian principles. By learning from each other's experiences, the EU and ASEAN can potentially refine their approaches and contribute

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more effectively to global efforts in managing displacement and protecting vulnerable populations. Ultimately, addressing the refugee issue requires a multifaceted approach that respects regional particularities while striving for comprehensive and humane solutions. The insights gained from comparing EU and ASEAN policies offer valuable lessons for policymakers, international organizations, and stakeholders engaged in the ongoing effort to address one of the most pressing humanitarian challenges of our time.

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**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity
Exercise 2023 for Indonesia and the Region:
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging**

Febry Triantama *

Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has recently conducted a joint military exercise named the ASEAN Solidarity Exercise (ASEX) 2023. The ASEX 2023 initiative was spearheaded by Indonesia. Despite ASEX 2023 being a non-combat joint military exercise, it remains a significant milestone for ASEAN's defense cooperation. This is attributed to the fact that, for the first time, ASEAN organized a joint military exercise involving all member states, excluding extraregional nations. To comprehend the motivations and significance of ASEX 2023 for Indonesia and ASEAN, this article conducts an analysis utilizing the concepts of Defense Diplomacy, the Typology of Multilateral Military Exercise and Institutional Hedging. The article concludes that ASEX 2023 holds great importance for Indonesia and ASEAN. Beyond serving as an instrument of

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defense diplomacy and as a recruitment process and rehearsal for ASEAN in preparation for future multilateral joint operations, ASEX 2023 is an important Institutional Hedging strategy for ASEAN.

Keywords: ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023, Defense Diplomacy, Multilateral Military Exercises, Institutional Hedging, Indonesia

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I. Introduction

The existence of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been subject to varied assessments by various experts. Some parties or experts have expressed negative or skeptical views regarding the existence and role of ASEAN. The negative evaluations attributed to ASEAN stem from the perception that it has not provided tangible benefits to its members.¹ Various forms of cooperation within ASEAN are also often viewed as ineffective.² On the other hand, there are also those who hold positive views and praise the presence and role of ASEAN. Positive assessments of ASEAN include the belief that ASEAN has been able to mitigate potential conflicts in Southeast Asia.³ Additionally, ASEAN is considered to have developed, as

¹ Mark Beeson. "ASEAN's Ways: Still Fit for Purpose?." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22. no. 3 (2009): 333–43.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570903137776>; Mark Beeson. "Multilateralism in East Asia: Less than the Sum of Its Parts?." *Global Summitry* 2. no. 1 (June 2016): 54–70. <https://doi.org/10.1093/global/guw007>; Shaun Narine. *The New ASEAN in Asia Pacific and Beyond* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner. 2018).

² Beeson. "Multilateralism in East Asia: Less than the Sum of Its Parts?"; Mathew Davies. "The Perils of Incoherence: ASEAN, Myanmar and the Avoidable Failures of Human Rights Socialization." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 34. no. 1 (2012): 1–22.

³ Timo Kivimäki. "Power, Interest or Culture - Is There a Paradigm That Explains ASEAN's Political Role Best?." *Pacific Review* 21. no. 4 (2008): 431–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512740802294663>; See Seng Tan. "Is ASEAN Finally Getting Multilateralism Right? From ARF to ADMM+." *Asian Studies Review* 44. no. 1 (2020): 28–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1691502>.

evidenced by the expanding cooperation across various fields such as economy, culture, and defense.⁴

One concrete manifestation of the increasing defense cooperation within ASEAN, particularly in the defense sector, can be observed in the events of September 2023. During this period, specifically from September 19 to 23, 2023, ASEAN conducted a joint military exercise named “ASEAN Solidarity Exercise (ASEX) 2023.”⁵ Although ASEX 2023 was a non-combat joint military exercise, it is considered a pivotal moment in the history of ASEAN defense cooperation and ASEAN institutional development.⁶ This is attributed to several factors. Firstly, ASEX 2023 marked the first joint military exercise in ASEAN that

⁴ Le Hu. “Examining ASEAN’s Effectiveness in Managing South China Sea Disputes.” *The Pacific Review* 36. no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 119–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2021.1934519>; Koichi Ishikawa. “The ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN Economic Integration.” *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 10. no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 24–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2021.1891702>.

⁵ Kate Mayberry. “‘Baby Steps’ for ASEAN as It Wraps up First-Ever Joint Military Drills.” *Aljazeera*. September 25, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/25/baby-steps-for-asean-as-it-wraps-up-first-ever-joint-military-drills>; Sebastian Strangio. “ASEAN Kicks off Joint Military Exercise Near Batam Island.” *The Diplomat*. September 19, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/asean-kicks-off-joint-military-exercise-near-batam-island/>; Collin Koh Swee. “ASEX-01N Strengthens the Intra-ASEAN Military Landscape.” October 27, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.59425/eabc.1698444005>; Rahman Yaacob. “ASEAN’s First Joint Military Exercise.” *Lowy Institute*. 2023. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/asean-s-first-joint-military-exercise>.

⁶ Mayberry. “‘Baby Steps’ for ASEAN as It Wraps up First-Ever Joint Military Drills.”

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involved all member countries exclusively.⁷ ASEX 2023 was thus seen as a symbol of ASEAN unity amid the intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China in the region. Over the past few years, China's assertiveness in the South China Sea has escalated significantly, characterized notably by the development of artificial islands and their transformation into forward bases in the region.⁸ In contrast, the United States and its allies have reacted in different ways, including creating a new alliance with the United Kingdom and Australia (AUKUS) and setting up a military base in Papua New Guinea.⁹ The growing political and economic influence of both powers on individual ASEAN member states has further challenged the bloc's cohesion and centrality.¹⁰ Against this backdrop, ASEX 2023 reaffirmed ASEAN unity and readiness to face future conflicts, as emphasized in the opening remarks delivered by the Commander

⁷ Ibid.; Strangio. "ASEAN Kicks off Joint Military Exercise Near Batam Island"; Swee. "ASEX-01N Strengthens the Intra-ASEAN Military Landscape"; Yaacob. "ASEAN's First Joint Military Exercise."

⁸ Shahryar Pasandideh. "Do China's New Islands Allow It to Militarily Dominate the South China Sea?." *Asian Security* 17. no. 1 (2021): 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2020.1749598>; Michael Yahuda. "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea." *Journal of Contemporary China* 22. no. 81 (2013): 446–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2012.748964>.

⁹ Suneel Kumar. "Shifting Balance of Power and the Formation of AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific Region." *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs*. October 31, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18366503.2023.2271254>.

¹⁰ Huong Le Thu. "China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement towards ASEAN." *Pacific Review* 32. no. 1 (2019): 20–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2017.1417325>.

of the Indonesian National Defense Forces, Admiral Yudo Margono.¹¹

Secondly, ASEX 2023 was the first joint military exercise in ASEAN to engage all three branches - Army, Navy, and Air Force simultaneously.¹² This is in contrast to the earlier ASEAN Multilateral Naval Exercise (AMNEX), which only involved seven ASEAN countries and exclusively focused on naval forces.¹³ Third, unlike most ASEAN joint military exercises—which typically emphasise combat-oriented scenarios such as AMNEX—ASEX 2023 focused instead on non-combat operations. These included, for example, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Search and Rescue (SAR) operations, and cargo drop missions.¹⁴ This focus aligns with the

¹¹ Adrial Akbar. “Semua Militer ASEAN Hadir Latihan Asex-01. Panglima TNI Bicara Sentralitas.” Detiknews. September 19, 2023. <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-6939886/semua-militer-asean-hadir-latihan-ase-x-01-panglima-tni-bicara-sentralitas>.

¹² Mayberry. “‘Baby Steps’ for ASEAN as It Wraps up First-Ever Joint Military Drills.”

¹³ Swee. “ASEX-01N Strengthens the Intra-ASEAN Military Landscape.”

¹⁴ Antara. “ACDFM 2023 Strives for Strengthening ASEAN Security and Prosperity.” Antara: Indonesia News Agency. June 9, 2023. <https://en.antaranews.com/news/284535/acdfm-2023-strives-for-strengthening-asean-security-and-prosperity>; Puspen TNI. “Catat Sejarah: ASEX-01 Latihan Non-Militer Pertama Seluruh Negara ASEAN.” PPID Tentara Nasional Indonesia. September 26, 2023. <https://ppid.tni.mil.id/view/32436909/catat-sejarah-asex-01-latihan-non-militer-pertama-seluruh-negara-asean.html>; Singapore Ministry of Defense. “SAF Participates in ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023.” MINDEF Singapore. September 19, 2023.

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specific needs of the ASEAN region, which remains highly vulnerable to natural disasters. Notably, Southeast Asia accounted for nearly 50% of global disaster-related fatalities between 2004 and 2014.¹⁵

The success of the landmark ASEX 2023 exercise cannot be separated from Indonesia's leadership and active role. Indonesia has long been recognised as a key leader within ASEAN, frequently initiating various frameworks and cooperative programs—such as the Workshop on Managing Potential Conflict in the South China Sea.¹⁶ In addition, Indonesia has repeatedly played the role of mediator in regional conflicts across Southeast Asia, including during the Cambodia–Thailand border dispute over the Preah Vihear temple, as well as in the ongoing political crisis in Myanmar.¹⁷ Indonesia initiated and hosted the joint military exercise, with the initiative first proposed by Admiral Yudho Margono, during the 20th ASEAN Chief of Defense Forces Meeting (ACDFM) held in Bali from June 5 to 9, 2023. Indonesia's initiative within the ACDFM was driven by its view

https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2023/September/19sep23_nr#.

¹⁵ Swee. "ASEX-01N Strengthens the Intra-ASEAN Military Landscape."

¹⁶ Klaus Heinrich Raditio. "Indonesia Must Reclaim Its ASEAN Leadership." Lowy Institute. January 31, 2025.

<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indonesia-must-reclaim-its-asean-leadership>.

¹⁷ Ratih Indraswari. "ASEAN Centrality: Comparative Case Study of Indonesia Leadership." *Journal of ASEAN Studies* 10. no. 1 (2022): 1–19.

<https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v10i1.7906>.

that ASEAN centrality must be consistently upheld and prioritised as a foundation for maintaining regional stability and peace.¹⁸ All ASEAN member countries unanimously agreed to and supported Indonesia's initiative.¹⁹

Shortly after the ACDFM, Indonesia organized a follow-up meeting to discuss the preparations for the joint military exercise in the Initial Planning Conference (IPC) for ASEAN Solidarity Exercise-01 Natuna (ASEX-01N).²⁰ During this meeting, an agreement was reached to relocate the ASEX 2023 exercise from

¹⁸ Akbar. "Semua Militer ASEAN Hadir Latihan Asex-01. Panglima TNI Bicara Sentralitas"; RRI. "Asex 01-Natuna Kunci Keberhasilan Jaga Perdamaian Kawasan ASEAN." Radio Republik Indonesia. September 24, 2023.

<https://www.rri.co.id/nasional/371800/asex-01-natuna-kunci-keberhasilan-jaga-perdamaian-kawasan-asean>; Puspen TNI. "Latihan Interoperabilitas Penanganan Bencana. ASEX -01 Tumbuhkan Soliditas ASEAN" (Jakarta. January 1, 2023). <https://tni.mil.id/files/files/SP/2023/SP234INTER.pdf>.

¹⁹ ANTARA. "Panglima TNI Buka Latihan Militer ASEAN Pertama ASEX-01 Natuna." ANTARA NEWS. September 19, 2023.

<https://jambi.antaranews.com/berita/556545/panglima-tni-buka-latihan-militer-asean-pertama-asex-01-natuna>; Mayberry. "'Baby Steps' for ASEAN as It Wraps up First-Ever Joint Military Drills"; PUSKERSIN TNI. "The 20th ASEAN Chief of Defense Force Meeting (ACDFM) –." Pusat Kerjasama Internasional Mabes TNI. 2023.

<https://puskersin-tni.mil.id/the-20th-asean-chief-of-defense-force-meeting-acdfm/>.

²⁰ CNN Indonesia. "TNI Persiapkan Latihan Gabungan ASEAN Din Batam Hingga Natuna." CNN Indonesia. June 20, 2023.

<https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20230620160141-20-964329/tni-persiapkan-latihan-gabungan-asean-di-batam-hingga-natuna>; Markas Besar TNI. "Jelang Latihan Bersama Militer ASEAN. Mabes TNI Siapkan Skenario Latihan." Markas Besar TNI. June 20, 2023.

<https://tni.mil.id/view-227432-jelang-latihan-bersama-militer-asean-mabes-tni-siapkan-skenario-latihan.html>.

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its initial planned location near the South China Sea, specifically in the North Natuna Sea, to the Batam region. The relocation was believed to accommodate concerns from two ASEAN countries with close ties to China, namely Cambodia and Myanmar, who worried that holding ASEX 2023 in Natuna could be perceived as provocative by China.²¹

The relocation of the ASEX 2023 exercise yielded positive results. Cambodia and Myanmar, initially doubtful of their participation, confirmed their presence in the ASEX 2023 event. Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei Darussalam also sent their warships to participate.²² All fleets and forces involved in ASEX 2023 engaged in various joint military exercise activities, focusing on Joint Maritime Patrol Operations, Medical Evacuations, Search and Rescue (SAR), as well as Humanitarian

²¹ Strangio. "ASEAN Kicks off Joint Military Exercise Near Batam Island"; Swee. "ASEX-01N Strengthens the Intra-ASEAN Military Landscape"; Yaacob. "ASEAN's First Joint Military Exercise."

²² Tria Dianti. "Southeast Asian Nations Set to Begin First ASEAN-Only Joint Military Exercise." Benar News Indonesia. September 18, 2023.

<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/asean-members-only-military-exercise-to-begin-09182023124559.html>; Genta Tenri Mawangi. "KRI John Lie-358 Pimpin Latihan Bersama ASEX-01N 2023 Di Natuna Utara." Antara News Agency. 2023.

<https://kepri.antaranews.com/berita/167082/kri-john-lie-358-pimpin-latihan-bersama-asex-01-n-2023-di-natuna-utara>; Swee. "ASEX-01N Strengthens the Intra-ASEAN Military Landscape."

Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in simulated affected areas.²³

Despite Indonesia's initiation and hosting of ASEX 2023, it is essential to note that Indonesia has a history of conducting joint military exercises. Several joint military exercises conducted by Indonesia include the Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo, Super Garuda Shield, Sharp Knife, and Elang Indopura.²⁴ However, despite Indonesia's extensive history of conducting joint military exercises, there has been limited prior research on this topic. This is not surprising, as some studies have indicated that joint military exercises are understudied cases.²⁵

The majority of previous studies suggest that joint military exercises conducted by Indonesia are part of defense diplomacy.

²³ CNN Indonesia. "TNI Persiapkan Latihan Gabungan ASEAN Din Batam Hingga Natuna"; Markas Besar TNI. "Jelang Latihan Bersama Militer ASEAN. Mabes TNI Siapkan Skenario Latihan"; Yaacob. "ASEAN's First Joint Military Exercise."

²⁴ Iis Gindarsah. "Strategic Hedging in Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy." *Defense and Security Analysis* 32. no. 4 (2016): 336–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2016.1233695>; Frega Wenas Inkiriwang. "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 40. no. 3 (2021): 418–35; Frega Wenas Inkiriwang. "'Garuda Shield' vs 'Sharp Knife': Operationalising Indonesia's Defence Diplomacy." *Pacific Review* 0. no. 0 (2020): 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2020.1772352>.

²⁵ Yee Kuang Heng. "UK-Japan Military Exercises and Mutual Strategic Reassurance." *Defence Studies* 21. no. 3 (2021): 334–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2021.1931134>; Raymond Kuo and Brian Dylan Blankenship. "Deterrence and Restraint: Do Joint Military Exercises Escalate Conflict?." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 66. no. 1 (January 25, 2022): 3–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027211023147>.

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As components of defense diplomacy, joint military exercises can be driven by four motives: (1) Confidence Building Measures,²⁶ (2) Strategic Engagements,²⁷ (3) Capacity Building,²⁸ and (4) Enhancement of international reputation.²⁹ However, the effectiveness of joint military exercises conducted by Indonesia is not always guaranteed. For example, the joint military exercise between the Indonesian Navy and the United States through

²⁶ Gindarsah. "Strategic Hedging in Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy"; Inkiriwang. "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?"; Inkiriwang. "'Garuda Shield' vs 'Sharp Knife': Operationalising Indonesia's Defence Diplomacy"; Bhuhindar Singh and See Seng Tan. "Introduction: Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia." in From "Boots" to "Brogues" the Rise of Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia. ed. Bhuhindar Singh and See Seng Tan. vol. 21 (Singapore: Rajaratnam School of International Studies. 2011). 1–17.

²⁷ Dewi Fortuna Anwar. "Indonesia's Hedging plus Policy in the Face of China's Rise and the US-China Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific Region." *The Pacific Review* 36. no. 2 (March 4, 2023): 351–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2160794>; Inkiriwang. "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?"; Inkiriwang. "'Garuda Shield' vs 'Sharp Knife': Operationalising Indonesia's Defence Diplomacy"; Vibhanshu Shekhar. "Indonesia's Great-Power Management in the Indo-Pacific: The Balancing Behavior of a 'Dove State.'" *Asia Policy* 17. no. 4 (October 2022): 123–49. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2022.0062>; Singh and Tan. "Introduction: Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia."

²⁸ Inkiriwang. "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?"; Inkiriwang. "'Garuda Shield' vs 'Sharp Knife': Operationalising Indonesia's Defence Diplomacy."

²⁹ Inkiriwang. "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?"; Inkiriwang. "'Garuda Shield' vs 'Sharp Knife': Operationalising Indonesia's Defence Diplomacy."

CARAT is considered merely symbolic and annual.³⁰ Joint military exercises conducted by Indonesia with other countries are based on shared interests among participating nations.³¹

Through previous studies, we can understand that joint military exercises in Indonesia are a strategy of defense diplomacy made possible by shared interests. However, none of these previous studies specifically address ASEX 2023, which, as mentioned earlier, is a monumental event in the development of defense cooperation in ASEAN. Therefore, this research aims to provide an analysis of why Indonesia initiated ASEX 2023 and its significance for ASEAN.

II. Why States Conducting Joint Military Exercises?

Although the phenomenon of joint military exercises remains an under-researched topic, both bilateral and multilateral exercises have been conducted for a long time.³² Wolfley (2021) asserts

³⁰ Rizky Windu Karsa. "NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL MONTEREY. CALIFORNIA THESIS U.S.-INDONESIA NAVAL COOPERATION: THE EVOLUTION OF EXERCISE CARAT. 2005-2021." 2022.

³¹ Reynaldo Rudy Kristian Montolalu, Anak Agung Banyu Perwita, and Sudibyo. "THE OPERATIONAL IMPACTS OF THE U.S.-INDONESIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP ON THE JOINT MILITARY EXERCISES GARUDA SHIELD." *Indonesian Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 2 (2023): 212–40. <https://doi.org/10.32787/ijir.v7i2.459>.

³² Heng. "UK-Japan Military Exercises and Mutual Strategic Reassurance"; Beatrice Heuser. "Reflections on the Purposes, Benefits and Pitfalls of Military Exercises." in *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact*, vol. 26 (Rome: Nato Defence College, 2018). 9–27; Beatrice Heuser and

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that nations are increasingly utilizing joint military exercises to influence friendly or adversarial nations.³³ The escalating frequency of joint military exercises cannot be detached from the roles and benefits derived from such exercises with other nations. These exercises not only yield benefits in military strategic aspects but also serve political interests of the participating countries.³⁴

As a military-involved activity, joint military exercises undoubtedly bring strategic and defense benefits to a nation. Traditionally and simplistically, military exercises are intended to ensure and enhance readiness for warfare. However, in a more detailed examination, at the strategic level, there are at least three goals that nations seek to achieve through joint military exercises. Firstly, enhancing inter-operability, which is crucial in facing the current potential full-spectrum or multi-domain conflicts, requiring effective inter-operability between military branches or

Harold Simpson. "The Missing Political Dimension of Military Exercises." *RUSI Journal* 162. no. 3 (May 4, 2017): 20–28.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2017.1345118>; Kuo and Blankenship.

"Deterrence and Restraint: Do Joint Military Exercises Escalate Conflict?"

³³ Kyle J. Wolfley. "Military Statecraft and the Use of Multinational Exercises in World Politics." in *Foreign Policy Analysis*. vol. 17 (Oxford University Press. 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/oraa022>.

³⁴ Ibid.; Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster. *Reshaping Defence Diplomacy : New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance* (London: Oxford University Press. 2004); Gindarsah. "Strategic Hedging in Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy"; Heuser. "Reflections on the Purposes, Benefits and Pitfalls of Military Exercises"; B. S. Sachar. "Cooperation in Military Training as a Tool of Peacetime Military Diplomacy." *Strategic Analysis* 27. no. 3 (July 1, 2003): 404–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160308450097>.

even among friendly nations.³⁵ Secondly, maintaining or improving combat readiness of forces. Thirdly, adapting and testing new doctrines and weapon technologies.³⁶

However, as mentioned earlier, joint military exercises today are not solely conducted for strategic benefits. Such exercises, whether bilateral or multilateral, have political dimensions that cannot be overlooked.³⁷ Joint military exercises are even viewed

³⁵ Andrew Dorman. Mike Smith. and Matthew Uttley. *The Changing Face of Military Power: Joint Warfare in an Expeditionary Era* (London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2002); Andrew Dorman. Mike Lawrence Smith. and Matthew Uttley. "Jointery and Combined Operations in an Expeditionary Era: Defining the Issues*." *Defense Analysis* 14. no. 1 (1998): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07430179808405745>; Michael Evans. "The Twenty-First Century Security Environment: Challenges for Joint Forces." *RUSI Journal* 154. no. 2 (2009): 64–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071840902965752>; Oscar Jonsson and Robert Seely. "Russian Full-Spectrum Conflict: An Appraisal after Ukraine." *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28. no. 1 (2015): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2015.998118>; Stuart James. "Full Spectrum Education for Full Spectrum Operations: Educating the Army's Junior Captains for Full Spectrum Operations" (United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College. 2008). <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a490794.pdf>.

³⁶ Derrick V. Frazier and J. Wesley Hutto. "The Socialization of Military Power: Security Cooperation and Doctrine Development through Multinational Military Exercises." *Defence Studies* 17. no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 379–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2017.1377050>; Heuser. "Reflections on the Purposes. Benefits and Pitfalls of Military Exercises"; Wolfley. "Military Statecraft and the Use of Multinational Exercises in World Politics."

³⁷ Andris Banka and Margit Bussmann. "Uncomfortable Neighbors: NATO. Russia and the Shifting Logic of Military Exercises in the Baltics." *Defence Studies* 23. no. 1 (2023): 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2022.2089657>; Cottey and Forster. *Reshaping Defence Diplomacy : New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance*; Gindarsah. "Strategic Hedging in Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy"; Inkiriwang. "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's

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as one of the most effective and crucial defense diplomacy strategies.³⁸ This is because the implementation of joint military exercises, bringing together military personnel from different countries, allows for people-to-people interactions. This interaction then establishes a means of communication, mutual trust, and influences threat perceptions.³⁹

Similar to other defense diplomacy strategies, joint military exercises are undertaken by nations due to four main reasons. First, to prevent conflicts with potentially adversarial nations, known as strategic engagement. Second, joint military exercises can contribute to building mutual trust among nations, also known as confidence-building measures. Third, joint military exercises are driven by the motivation to enhance military capabilities.

Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?"; Sachar. "Cooperation in Military Training as a Tool of Peacetime Military Diplomacy"; Heuser and Simpson. "The Missing Political Dimension of Military Exercises."

³⁸ Inkiriwang. "'Garuda Shield' vs 'Sharp Knife': Operationalising Indonesia's Defence Diplomacy"; Inkiriwang. "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?"

³⁹ Cottey and Forster. *Reshaping Defence Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance*; Heuser. "Reflections on the Purposes, Benefits and Pitfalls of Military Exercises"; Inkiriwang. "'Garuda Shield' vs 'Sharp Knife': Operationalising Indonesia's Defence Diplomacy"; Inkiriwang. "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?"; Sachar. "Cooperation in Military Training as a Tool of Peacetime Military Diplomacy."

Fourth, these exercises are motivated by the desire to improve international reputation or prestige.⁴⁰

Understanding that joint military exercises can be driven by both strategic and political motives, a typology of joint military exercises has been developed. Although not explicitly using the terms “strategic” and “political,” Wolfley categorizes joint military exercises based on the use of power into “traditional” and “shaping.” Traditional uses encompass military activities designed to threaten or employ violence through coercion or brute force. Shaping, on the other hand, aims to influence both partners and rivals by changing the characteristics of other militaries or altering the relationship between them.⁴¹

This typology is then constructed by referring to the motivations for conducting joint military exercises. Through an analysis of these motivations, Wolfley (2021) divides joint military exercises into six different categories: (1) Rehearsal, (2) Deterrence, (3) Recruitment, (4) Capacity Building, (5) Role-Forming, and (6) Trust-Developing. It is noted that the execution of joint military exercises may be driven by more than

⁴⁰ Cottey and Forster. *Reshaping Defence Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance*; Inkiriwang. “‘Garuda Shield’ vs ‘Sharp Knife’: Operationalising Indonesia’s Defence Diplomacy”; Inkiriwang. “Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia’s Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?”

⁴¹ Wolfley. “Military Statecraft and the Use of Multinational Exercises in World Politics.”

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one factor, making it possible for a single exercise to fall into multiple types.⁴²

Exercise Type	Use of Military Power	Goal of Exercise	Mechanism of Influence
Rehearsal	Traditional	Increase effectiveness to accomplish missions with partners	Increase and/or test multinational military effectiveness.
Deterrence	Traditional	Prevent undesirable behavior from rival	Signal to adversary that costs of invasion outweigh benefits; also, may be used to signal assurance to allies.
Recruitment	Shaping	Attract and prepare partners for alliance membership or multilateral mission.	Convince partner's government officials, military, or public that the partnership is beneficial.
Capacity Building	Shaping	Delegate mission to other states to combat non-state actors	Strengthen partner to provide its own security or participate in regional missions.
Role-Forming	Shaping	Change practices or values of other militaries	Influence character of partner military to fulfill roles and develop certain practices.
Trust-Developing	Shaping	Prevent escalation or war with rivals	Change perceptions from hostile to friendly to prevent escalation of hostilities.

Table 1. Wofley’s Typology of Multilateral Military Exercises

Park Kyuri (2022), in her dissertation, presents a new perspective on the motivations of East Asian countries in conducting joint military exercises. According to her, in recent times, East Asian countries have become increasingly active in

⁴² Ibid.

organizing or participating in joint military exercises. This trend is attributed to the emergence of new motivations in conducting joint military exercises, namely as part of the hedging strategy of East Asian countries amid the competition for influence and power in the region.⁴³

III. ASEAN and Institutional Hedging

The concept of hedging in international relations is a strategy employed by states to manage geopolitical uncertainty by balancing between engagement and balancing. Unlike balancing, which aims to counter or contain a specific threat, or *bandwagoning*, which involves aligning with a major power for political or economic benefits, hedging allows states to remain flexible by neither explicitly taking side between two opposites political blocs.⁴⁴ In the context of foreign policy analysis, hedging can be understood as a state's strategy to simultaneous adoption of seemingly contradictory measures—such as fostering

⁴³ Kyuri Park. "Goldilocks' Signal for Security Cooperation in East Asia: China's Rise, Hedging, and Joint Exercises" (Dissertation, University of Southern California . 2022).

⁴⁴ Cheng-Chwee Kuik. "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30. no. 2 (2008): 159–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41220503>; Evelyn Goh. "Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies" (Washington. 2005); Cheng-Chwee Kuik. "Hedging via Institutions: ASEAN-Led Multilateralism in the Age of the Indo-Pacific." *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 10. no. 2 (December 1, 2022): 355–86. <https://doi.org/10.18588/202211.00a319>.

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economic cooperation with one major power while strengthening defense ties with another—to mitigate risks without committing to binding alliances.⁴⁵ Hedging is a foreign policy strategy frequently employed by small and middle powers when faced with great powers or global geopolitical competitions.

The implementation of hedging by small and middle powers is not only carried out as an individual foreign policy of each country. States can leverage international institutions, particularly regional institutions, as instruments of hedging. This approach is known as *Institutional Hedging*.⁴⁶ Just like *hedging* strategies, States utilise Institutional Hedging, to mitigate risks associated with geopolitical uncertainty by exploiting multilateral institutions in a strategic manner.⁴⁷ Cheng-Chwee Kuik (2022) explained that hedging – and Institutional Hedging – is not merely a policy of neutrality but rather an approach of counterbalancing, in which states engage with major powers concurrently while retaining the flexibility to adjust their position if circumstances

⁴⁵ Kuik. “The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore’s Response to a Rising China.”

⁴⁶ Mie Oba. “Further Development of Asian Regionalism: Institutional Hedging in an Uncertain Era.” *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 8. no. 2 (July 3, 2019): 125–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2019.1688905>; Kuik. “Hedging via Institutions: ASEAN-Led Multilateralism in the Age of the Indo-Pacific.”

⁴⁷ Kuik. “Hedging via Institutions: ASEAN-Led Multilateralism in the Age of the Indo-Pacific”; Oba. “Further Development of Asian Regionalism: Institutional Hedging in an Uncertain Era.”

shift.⁴⁸ According to Kuik (2022), there are at least three typical characteristics of institutional hedging: (1) aiming to mitigate and offset a broad range of risks, (2) impartiality and inclusivity, and (3) efforts to mitigate risks through binding, buffering, and building.⁴⁹

Oba (2019) notes that institutional hedging enables smaller states to mitigate risks by creating regional cooperation frameworks that strengthen their negotiating capabilities when interacting with dominant nations. Smaller states can exert pressure on larger powers to act more consistently and accountably in international dealings through multilateral organisations. Institutional hedging serves a dual purpose: it is a defensive measure, but also a means to construct a more stable security and economic framework.⁵⁰ States can maintain involvement in the global system and safeguard their sovereignty through the implementation of institutional hedging, thereby mitigating geopolitical uncertainty. This strategy is effectively exemplified by ASEAN, which utilizes a range of regional

⁴⁸ Kuik. "Hedging via Institutions: ASEAN-Led Multilateralism in the Age of the Indo-Pacific."

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Oba. "Further Development of Asian Regionalism: Institutional Hedging in an Uncertain Era."

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organisations means to counterbalance global powers without openly aligning with any single party.⁵¹

IV. Research Method

This research was conducted by using a qualitative approach. Based on the works of Christopher Lamont (2015), qualitative research is research that based on strategies or techniques for collecting and analyzing data that are non-numerical or based on the use of words.⁵² The data uses on this research are both primary and secondary data. Primary data is data that obtained from documents issued by the government and also official information and statement released by the government through press releases or official websites of the government. Documents refer to text or anything that is written, visually visible, or spoken through the medium of communication.⁵³ Secondary data is obtained from literature review, printed and online mass media, and previous research published in reputable journals and other scientific reports.

In conducting research, besides determining the research approach and data collection techniques, there is one more crucial

⁵¹ Kuik. "Hedging via Institutions: ASEAN-Led Multilateralism in the Age of the Indo-Pacific."

⁵² Christopher Lamont. *Research Methods in Politics and International Relations* (London: Sage Publications. 2015).

⁵³ William Lawrence Neuman. *Basics of Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Boston: Pearson. 2004).

aspect: data analysis techniques. In this study, the data analysis technique used by the author is Causal Process Tracing (CPT). According to Blatter and Haverland, CPT is an analytical approach based on two key elements: configurative thinking and causal configuration. One of the main objectives of CPT is to identify the conditions or prerequisites that lead to a particular event. The choice of CPT as the data analysis technique aligns with the research goal, which is to understand the reasons or motivations behind Indonesia's ASEX 2023 initiation and the significance of ASEX 2023 both for Indonesia and ASEAN as a medium for Defense Diplomacy and Strategic Hedging.⁵⁴

Blatter and Haverland further explain that CPT consists of two techniques based on theoretical analysis: causal combination and causal mechanism. In the context of this study, the author will use causal combination. According to Blatter and Haverland, causal combination is a cause-and-effect model formed by combining various causal configurations. Causal combination can also be used alongside what is referred to as causal conjunction and additive configuration. Causal conjunction is a variation of causal configuration in which multiple causal conditions operate simultaneously (either additively or interactively). Meanwhile, additive configuration is an analytical technique that allows for

⁵⁴ Joachim Blatter and Markus Haverland. *Designing Case Studies: Explanatory Approaches in Small-N Research*. 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

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the possibility that not all causal factors need to be present to produce a particular event (substitutable).⁵⁵

V. ASEX 2023: Indonesia's and ASEAN's Defense Diplomacy

Joint military exercises have long been conducted by various nations, serving not only defense purposes but also political interests. Such exercises can even constitute a form of a country's foreign policy, particularly through defense diplomacy. As articulated by numerous experts, military exercises, as a defense diplomacy strategy, are undertaken for four main reasons: (1) Strategic Engagements, (2) Confidence Building Measures, (3) Capacity Building, and (4) Pursuit of International Reputation. Therefore, the analysis in this article will commence by examining the significance of ASEX 2023 as a defense diplomacy strategy, both for Indonesia as the initiator and for ASEAN as a whole.

VI. ASEX 2023: Indonesia's and ASEAN's Defense Diplomacy

Defense diplomacy involves the utilization of military elements not for their traditional purpose, namely war or the use of force. In other words, defense diplomacy is the use of military elements for peaceful purposes. Initially, the implementation of

⁵⁵ Ibid.

defense diplomacy was carried out by countries within the same alliance or, at the very least, friendly nations. However, with the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, there has been a shift in the execution of defense diplomacy. Presently, defense diplomacy is increasingly employed as a strategy to prevent conflicts with potential rivals or countries with a history of conflict, a strategy commonly referred to as strategic engagement.

Referring to the earlier explanation, the execution of the joint military exercise ASEX 2023 can be categorized as strategic engagement. ASEX 2023 plays a crucial role not only as strategic engagement for Indonesia as the initiator but also for ASEAN as a whole. This is because ASEX 2023 brings together countries with potential conflicts or a history of conflict. Looking from the perspective of Indonesia as the initiator, ASEX 2023 involves interactions with at least two countries with a past conflictual relationship, namely Malaysia and Singapore. Indonesia has a conflictual history with both countries, which began during the era of President Sukarno when Indonesia pursued a confrontational political approach.

The conflict between Indonesia and Malaysia during the era of political confrontation was not merely an agitative and confrontational narrative. President Sukarno even took the policy to sever diplomatic ties with Malaysia. Additionally, Indonesia sent volunteer militias trained and supported by the Armed Forces to the Malaysian territory in Kalimantan, engaging in combat with

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Malaysian forces. Although diplomatic relations were officially restored after the end of the confrontation policy, the relationship between the two countries was often characterized by mutual distrust and occasional tensions.⁵⁶ The heightened tensions were due, in part, to sovereignty disputes, including those in Ambalat and the Sipadan-Ligitan Islands.

Indonesia's relationship with Singapore was also marked by a conflictual past during the era of political confrontation. Indonesia, at that time, sent special naval forces (marines) to infiltrate and bomb MacDonald House. This mission was carried out by Corporal Two Harun Tohir and Sergeant Two Usman Janatin and Gani. The two Indonesian marine soldiers were captured and considered terrorists by the Singapore government, resulting in their death sentences. However, on the other hand, both were hailed as national heroes by the Indonesian government. Even the names Usman and Harun were immortalized as the names of one of the newest warships of the Indonesian Navy in 2014.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ J Soedjati Djiwandono. "INDONESIA'S RELATIONS WITH OTHER SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES." *Asian Perspective* 1. no. 1 (1977): 32–52. <http://about.jstor.org/terms>.

⁵⁷ CNN Indonesia. "Fakta KRI Usman Harun Di Natuna Yang Bikin Jengkel Singapura." CNN Indonesia. 2020. <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/teknologi/20200109141152-199-463843/fakta-kri-usman-harun-di-natuna-yang-bikin-jengkel-singapura>.

However, Indonesia's decision sparked controversy and protests from the public and the Singaporean government.⁵⁸ The Singaporean government, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense, was the most vocal in expressing its objections. The Defense Minister of Singapore at that time even stated in parliament that KRI Usman Harun was permanently prohibited from docking in Singapore and participating in joint operations or exercises with Singapore.⁵⁹ The naming of KRI Usman-Harun was considered to reopen old wounds and could

⁵⁸ Margareth S. Aritonang. "Row with Singapore Escalates as TNI Chief Defends Usman and Harun - World - The Jakarta Post." Jakarta Post. 2014. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/02/10/row-with-singapore-escalate-s-tni-chief-defends-usman-and-harun.html-1>; Bagus BT. Saragih and Margareth S. Aritonang. "Indonesia. Singapore in Row over Name of Navy Ship - National - The Jakarta Post." Jakarta Post. 2014. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/02/07/indonesia-singapore-row-over-name-navy-ship.html>; Satish Cheney. "1965 Bombing Still Stains Relations between Singapore and Indonesia." South China Morning Post. 2014. <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1427310/1965-bombing-still-stains-relations-between-singapore-and-indonesia>; Zakir Husain. "Singapore Expresses Disappointment at Indo Marines Who Pose as Bombers." The Straits Times. 2014. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapore-expresses-disappointment-at-indo-marines-who-pose-as-bombers>; Muhaimin. "Media Singapura: KRI Usman Harun Harus Ditolak Masuk." Seputar Indonesia. 2014. <https://international.sindonews.com/berita/833921/40/media-singapura-kri-usman-harun-harus-ditolak-masuk>.

⁵⁹ Cheney. "1965 Bombing Still Stains Relations between Singapore and Indonesia"; Husain. "Singapore Expresses Disappointment at Indo Marines Who Pose as Bombers"; Muhaimin. "Media Singapura: KRI Usman Harun Harus Ditolak Masuk."

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have negative consequences on the bilateral relations between the two countries.⁶⁰

In addition to serving as strategic engagement for Indonesia as the initiator, ASEX 2023 also serves as strategic engagement for other ASEAN countries. This is because the participating countries in ASEX 2023 also have the potential for conflict or a history of conflict. One concrete example of potential conflicts among ASEAN countries is the sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea. Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Brunei Darussalam still have sovereignty claims and sovereign rights in the South China Sea.⁶¹ As stated by various experts, the likelihood of conflict increases when there are sovereignty disputes and proximity.⁶²

⁶⁰ Aritonang. "Row with Singapore Escalates as TNI Chief Defends Usman and Harun - World - The Jakarta Post"; Saragih and Aritonang. "Indonesia. Singapore in Row over Name of Navy Ship - National - The Jakarta Post"; Cheney. "1965 Bombing Still Stains Relations between Singapore and Indonesia."

⁶¹ Arityo Rizki Darmawan. "ASEAN Outlook to Solve South China Sea Dispute?." The Asean Post. 2020.
<https://theaseanpost.com/article/asean-outlook-solve-south-china-sea-dispute>;
Bec Strating and Troy Lee-Brown. "Tensions in South China Sea Continue. but ASEAN States Successfully Resolve Maritime Disputes." The Jakarta Post. 2023.
<https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2023/05/03/tensions-in-south-china-sea-continue-but-asean-successfully-resolves-maritime-disputes.html>.

⁶² Harvey Starr and Benjamin A. Most. "The Substance and Study of Borders in International Relations Research." *International Studies Quarterly* 20. no. 4 (1976): 581–620; Harvey Starr and Benjamin A. Most. "A Return Journey: Richardson. 'Frontiers' and Wars in the 1946-1965 Era." *Journal of Conflict*

In addition to functioning as strategic engagement for ASEAN countries with disputes in the South China Sea, ASEX 2023 also serves as strategic engagement for Thailand and Cambodia. These two countries have a historical conflict related to sovereignty in the vicinity of the ancient temple of Preah Vihear. The long-standing conflict escalated again, leading to the loss of lives on both sides in 2011.⁶³ This conflict was classified as an open conflict by the ASEAN Secretariat.⁶⁴ Vietnam and Cambodia can also utilize ASEX 2023 as strategic engagement between them. As known, both countries were involved in armed conflict in the late 1970s. The armed conflict was triggered by Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia to overthrow the Khmer Rouge regime led by Pol Pot.⁶⁵

Resolution 22. no. 3 (1978): 441–67. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15wxqbn>; Stephen Walt. *The Origins of Alliances* (New York: Cornell University Press. 1987). <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpedi.1976.02120060011002>.

⁶³ France24. “Border Clashes Continue. Damaging Hindu Temple World Heritage Site.” France24. 2011. <https://www.france24.com/en/20110206-border-clashes-continue-despite-repeated-ceasefires-thailand-cambodia>; Murray Hiebert and Amy Killian. “Thailand. Cambodia Spar at UN Court over Preah Vihear Temple.” 2013; United Nations. “UN Court Rules for Cambodia in Preah Vihear Temple Dispute with Thailand | UN News.” United Nations. 2011. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/11/455062>.

⁶⁴ Martin Wagener. “Lessons from Preah Vihear: Thailand. Cambodia. and the Nature of Low-Intensity Border Conflicts.” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 3 (2011): 27–59.

⁶⁵ Gindarsah. “Strategic Hedging in Indonesia’s Defense Diplomacy”; Inkiriwang. “‘Garuda Shield’ vs ‘Sharp Knife’: Operationalising Indonesia’s Defence Diplomacy”; Kementerian Pertahanan Indonesia. *Buku Putih*

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VII. ASEX 2023: ASEAN's Confidence Building Measures

In addition to being driven by the motif of strategic engagement, joint military exercises, as a defense diplomacy strategy, are also motivated by another aspect – the effort to enhance mutual trust or confidence building measures among participating nations. Joint military exercises provide a platform for interaction among nations through their militaries. This interaction can foster understanding among nations, ultimately minimizing mutual distrust. The Indonesian government places great importance on confidence building measures as a vital motif for the implementation of Indonesian defense diplomacy.⁶⁶

In the context of this research, the conduct of ASEX 2023 is inseparable from the motif of confidence building measures. As mentioned earlier, both Indonesia as the initiator of ASEX 2023 and other ASEAN countries still have the potential for conflicts among themselves. Past conflict records may still leave wounds that could reopen when diplomatic relations between countries encounter stumbling blocks. Some experts even state that there is

Pertahanan 2015 [Indonesia's 2015 Defense White Paper] (Kementerian Pertahanan Indonesia. 2015).wd

⁶⁶ Gindarsah. "Strategic Hedging in Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy"; Inkiriwang. "'Garuda Shield' vs 'Sharp Knife': Operationalising Indonesia's Defence Diplomacy"; Kementerian Pertahanan Indonesia. Buku Putih Pertahanan 2015 [Indonesia's 2015 Defense White Paper] (Kementerian Pertahanan Indonesia. 2015).

still a high level of distrust among ASEAN member states, contributing to the weak solidarity within ASEAN.⁶⁷ This also makes it difficult for ASEAN to form a united community, known as the ASEAN Community.⁶⁸

The relatively high distrust among ASEAN member states is not solely based on qualitative assessments by experts. Roberts (2007) presents statistical data from surveys conducted on the public or citizens of ASEAN countries regarding their views on other nations. Overall, only 37.5% of respondents stated that they could trust their neighboring countries to be a "good neighbor." When examining the perceptions of respondents from each ASEAN country, Indonesia has the highest level of distrust towards neighboring countries, reaching 58.3%. Moreover, if we consider the perceptions of academics and political elites in ASEAN, the percentage answering that they do not trust their neighboring countries to be a "good neighbor" reaches 59.8%.⁶⁹

The existing distrust in diplomatic relations among ASEAN countries is not only caused by territorial disputes or memories of

⁶⁷ Le Thu. "China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement towards ASEAN"; Joseph Liow. "Internal Discord the Greatest Threat to Southeast Asian Unity." East Asia Forum. June 28, 2023. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/06/28/internal-discord-the-greatest-threat-to-southeast-asian-unity/>; Christopher B Roberts. "The ASEAN Community: Trusting Thy Neighbour?." RSIS Commentaries 110 (October 22, 2007): 1–4. www.rsis.edu.sg; Geoff Wade. "ASEAN Divides." New Mandala. December 23, 2010. <https://www.newmandala.org/asean-divides/>.

⁶⁸ Roberts. "The ASEAN Community: Trusting Thy Neighbour?"

⁶⁹ Ibid.

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past conflicts. The presence of China's influence in ASEAN also contributes to division and distrust among ASEAN countries.⁷⁰ China's influence in ASEAN is manifested through at least two strategic partner countries – if not referred to as allies – in the region, namely Cambodia and Laos. These two ASEAN member countries often obstruct various ASEAN initiatives to address the South China Sea issue claimed by China, leading to distrust towards both countries. Cambodia and Laos are even labeled as Trojan Horses within ASEAN.⁷¹ In addition to Cambodia and Laos, distrust has also arisen towards Brunei Darussalam. This is because there is information suggesting that Brunei Darussalam approved China's Four Point Consensus proposal. The Four Point Consensus proposal states that the South China Sea dispute is not a matter between ASEAN and China, contrary to the agreement and majority view of ASEAN members who want the South China Sea issue to be discussed through ASEAN's multilateral forums.⁷²

ASEX 2023 as one of the confidence building measures in ASEAN is confirmed by statements from representatives of

⁷⁰ Le Thu. "China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement towards ASEAN."

⁷¹ Ibid.; Siew Mun Tang. "China Shoots Itself in the Foot with Divide and Rule Tactics in Asean." Today Online. June 17, 2016. <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/china-shoots-itself-foot-divide-and-rule-tactics-asean>.

⁷² Le Thu. "China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement towards ASEAN."

ASEAN countries involved. For example, in the opening speech delivered by the Commander of the Indonesian National Defense Forces (TNI), Admiral Yudho Margono. Admiral Margono stated that ASEAN should not be forced to choose sides in international political competition and must take the lead in transforming distrust into mutual trust.⁷³ Similar sentiments were also expressed by the Ministry of Defense of Singapore in its official release. In the closing speech of ASEX 2023, Admiral Margono reiterated the goals of the exercise, including enhancing mutual trust and unity in ASEAN:

"Through this training, we have mutually learned to understand the culture and military traditions of each other, and, most importantly, we have forged a strong sense of trust, solidarity, recognizing that unity is the key to ASEAN's success in preserving peace, stability, and security in this region"⁷⁴

⁷³ Antara. "ACDFM 2023 Strives for Strengthening ASEAN Security and Prosperity"; Gusty Da Costa. "Indonesia Hosts ASEAN Security Conference to Foster Trust. Address Global Concerns." Indo-Pacific Defense Forum. July 12, 2023.

<https://ipdefenseforum.com/2023/07/indonesia-hosts-asean-security-conference-to-foster-trust-address-global-concerns/>; Andika Hendra Mustaqim. "8 Keunggulan Latihan Militer Gabungan Anggota ASEAN." Sindonews. September 25, 2023.

<https://international.sindonews.com/read/1210121/45/8-keunggulan-latihan-militer-gabungan-anggota-asean-1695643745?showpage=all>.

⁷⁴ RRI. "Asex 01-Natuna Kunci Keberhasilan Jaga Perdamaian Kawasan ASEAN."

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**VIII. ASEX 2023: ASEAN's Confidence Building
Measures**

From a theoretical standpoint, the implementation of joint military exercises by nations serves not only as a strategic engagement and confidence-building measure but is also driven by another motif: capacity building, aiming to enhance military capabilities for specific operations.⁷⁵ Southeast Asian countries indeed consider capacity building as a primary motivation for conducting joint military exercises. This rationale is grounded in the contemporary reality where nations face increasingly complex and multidimensional threats.⁷⁶ Countries are not only confronted with the traditional threat of invasion from other nations but also non-traditional threats.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Inkiriwang. "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?"; Inkiriwang. "'Garuda Shield' vs 'Sharp Knife': Operationalising Indonesia's Defence Diplomacy."

⁷⁶ Inkiriwang. "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?"; Inkiriwang. "'Garuda Shield' vs 'Sharp Knife': Operationalising Indonesia's Defence Diplomacy"; Gindarsah. "Strategic Hedging in Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy."

⁷⁷ Sreeparna Banerjee and Pratinashree Basu. "Strengthening Partnerships to Counter Non-Traditional Security Threats in the Indo-Pacific." March 2022. <https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20230522162109.pdf>; Caballero-Anthony. "Non-Traditional Security Concept. Issues, and Implications on Security Governance." *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* 3. no. 1 (2016): 5–13. <https://dr.ntu.edu.sg>; Xue Gong. "Non-Traditional Security Cooperation between China and South-East Asia: Implications for Indo-Pacific Geopolitics." *International Affairs* (Oxford University Press, January 1, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz225>; Christopher Jasparro and Jonathan Taylor. "Climate Change and Regional Vulnerability to Transnational Security Threats

Non-traditional threats faced by Southeast Asian nations include natural disasters, transnational terrorism, and Transnational Organized Crimes (ToCs) such as sea piracy, transnational drug trafficking, IUU Fishing, and human smuggling.⁷⁸ Referring to Lee & Viswanathan (2020), Southeast Asian nations suffer economic losses amounting to millions of US dollars due to IUU Fishing

practices. Indonesia, in particular, incurs the largest losses, reaching USD 3 trillion.⁷⁹

in Southeast Asia.” *Geopolitics* 13. no. 2 (April 2008): 232–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040801991480>; Jürgen Rüländ. “The Nature of Southeast Asian Security Challenges.” *Security Dialogue* 36. no. 4 (December 2005): 545–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010605060453>.

⁷⁸ Banerjee and Basu. “Strengthening Partnerships to Counter Non-Traditional Security Threats in the Indo-Pacific”; Gindarsah. “Strategic Hedging in Indonesia’s Defense Diplomacy”; Jasparro and Taylor. “Climate Change and Regional Vulnerability to Transnational Security Threats in Southeast Asia”; Wen Chiat Lee and K Kuperan Viswanathan. “Framework for Managing Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing in ASEAN.” *ASEAN Fisheries Science* 33 (2020): 65–73. <https://doi.org/10.33997/j.afs.2020.33.1.008>; Rüländ. “The Nature of Southeast Asian Security Challenges.”

⁷⁹ Lee and Kuperan Viswanathan. “Framework for Managing Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing in ASEAN.”

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Countries / Region	Illegal Fishing Losses (USD M)
Brunei	13
Indonesia	3
Malaysia	334
Philippines	620
Thailand	500
Vietnam	1.6
Africa	1.351
Europe	1.4
World	10.000 – 23.500

Table 2. The Economic Losses from the Practice of Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing

Non-traditional threats emerging today exhibit a distinctive characteristic, namely, they are transnational or borderless in nature. In other words, non-traditional threats do not recognize national borders. For instance, transnational drug trafficking originating from the Golden Triangle region (Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand) extends to various Southeast Asian countries. Another example is the practice of IUU Fishing in Indonesian waters

carried out by Vietnamese fishermen.⁸⁰ Due to the transnational or borderless nature of these non-traditional threats, resolution efforts must also be transnational or, in other words, involve collaboration with other nations.

In the context of this article, ASEX 2023 is highly qualified to be considered an effort of capacity building for Indonesia and ASEAN in confronting transnational, borderless non-traditional threats. This is evident from the types of activities conducted during ASEX 2023. ASEX 2023, as a non-combat joint military exercise, involves various activities, including (1) Maritime Security Operations, (2) Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief (HADR), (3) Engineer Civil Action Project (ENCAP), (4) Medical Civil Action project (MEDCAP), (5) Cargo Drop, (6) Replenishment at Sea, (7) Deck Landing Qualification, (8) Subject Matter Expert Exchange, and (9) Search and Rescue (SAR) Operations.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Kadek Melda Luxiana. "TNI AL Tangkap 2 Kapal Vietnam Pencuri Ikan 15 Ton Di Laut Natuna Utara." Detik.com. July 25, 2022. <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-6198461/tni-al-tangkap-2-kapal-vietnam-pencuri-ikan-15-ton-di-laut-natuna-utara>; Norbertus Arya Dwiangga Martiar. "Pencurian Ikan Masih Marak Di Laut Natuna Utara." Kompas.id. April 17, 2023. <https://www.kompas.id/baca/polhuk/2023/04/17/pencurian-ikan-masih-marak-di-laut-natuna-utara>.

⁸¹ Antara. "ACDFM 2023 Strives for Strengthening ASEAN Security and Prosperity"; Puspen TNI. "Catat Sejarah: ASEX-01 Latihan Non-Militer Pertama Seluruh Negara ASEAN"; Singapore Ministry of Defense. "SAF Participates in ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023."

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The Maritime Security Operations conducted in ASEX 2023 are crucial for ASEAN's capacity building efforts. This is because Transnational Organized Crimes (ToCs) and transnational terrorism often exploit maritime areas for their activities. Thus, intensive and effective international cooperation is required to address such threats. In ASEAN, there are existing joint maritime patrol collaborations like the "Eyes-in-the-Sky" Combined Maritime Air Patrols (EiS), involving Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.⁸² ASEX 2023 not only enhances the

⁸² Singapore Ministry of Defense. "Fact Sheet: Indonesia-Singapore Coordinated Patrol (ISCP)." Singapore Ministry of Defense. May 11, 2012. https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2012/may/2012may11-news-releases-02335/?ut/p/z1/tVLLUsIwFP0WF12G3LYpLe4qOj6Ggg9Qmo2TlvShbQJtpPL3XkAXZgiOC7O6OTnn5p6TUE7nlCuxLnNhSq1EhfuY95_9yfnwCpgznnhTG8LH6XTknY2vZ36fPIJO-TItFzT23CB1PUhJYNs-YcwXJBEiIWzAAgdxlnjJlp0qszQFjetSLWRGUq2MVmaCQtfsAiW7lgi1IHKNatGtBJYxsDWIkJUUrEXDAdiyoxWZfYmHbZCf74hBwXNejT78Nz_EYDqWQUM93IMkdu7QZOKNJdO9hh8EgmMKtA5f-J-FIjxhn8A_P4NondSk7OI06qTHvzhz_GeQX0ZjfCEZf4huXLasVDjH6b9buh83_PHi91mmgY5WhHmIKUKtN0vtXg5WKzLw_L0VRe6WT_A0OVuAE2amQmG9n03hqEC2OW7akFFnRd18u1zivZS3VtwU-SQrfo-juTLus6cDfkNYsuXMaTTZdFxoVdKw_z4ZOn/dz/d5/L2dBISEvZ0FBIS9nQSEh/?uril=wcm%3Apath%3A%2Fmindef-content%2Fhome%2Fnews-and-events%2Flatest-release%2F2012%2Fmay%2F2012may11-News-Releases-02335#; Singapore Ministry of Defense. "Fact Sheet: The Malacca Straits Patrol." Singapore Ministry of Defense. April 21, 2015. https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2016/april/2016apr21-news-releases-00134/?ut/p/z1/vVFNC4IwFPwtHjhm8hIwyJHajrYj0g9UyKUTJGhaCIgZrf--Eduj7ftSnLlv-_bt22COU8y1OKiNMKrRor144-zVj2_HU_DoPB4mBMJlksyGN_P7hc_wEnPM27UqcCZoUeQuY4iR0kVeTnl0yhIFsnBzQXwRsICc2WttWrPFW10IUu0brSR2jiwbWrpGJbHPRK6QPJgq3sHKmHk3qBOVILspS1QIMwB0XaQuG7bPQT1jd8sBEBcD69-s8_tM1w5Idh-3lPiJ29CPKCzOHoeWoUgGCXwSGHifx-F0MisB_-6Bx-vDkoe8UI3XW0Tf_ljoFPAD72FH7a0v6jedjse2vDPaX8YnPSD-nYs7aJxtLELCbNFSpcNTs89OO0FLuC6QFvXI_eE3svozvV4fjqGg8EnMCLj_w!!/dz/d5/L

military capabilities of each participating nation for maritime patrol but also improves interoperability among nations in these joint maritime patrols. Interoperability between military branches and among nations is crucial for the effectiveness of jointly initiated maritime patrols, as emphasized by experts highlighting the importance of interoperability in regional-level joint operations.⁸³

Through ASEX 2023, activities such as HADR, SAR Operations, and Cargo Drop also contribute to enhancing ASEAN's military capabilities in dealing with non-traditional threats. As mentioned earlier, one of the major threats faced by ASEAN nations is natural disasters.⁸⁴ These three activities become vital during natural disasters. Military forces with strategic transport capabilities and good strategic mobility are required to play a frontline role in providing humanitarian assistance and recovery in affected areas. ASEX 2023 not only aims for the improvement of each country's military capacity but

2dBISvZ0FBIS9nQSEh/?uril=wcm%3Apath%3A%2Fmindef-content%2Fhome%2Fnews-and-events%2Flatest-releases%2F2016%2Fapril%2F2016apr21-News-Releases-00134.

⁸³ Terry Moon, Suzanne Fewell, and Hayley Reynolds. "The What, Why, When and How of Interoperability." *Defense and Security Analysis* 24, no. 1 (March 2008): 5–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751790801903178>.

⁸⁴ Banerjee and Basu. "Strengthening Partnerships to Counter Non-Traditional Security Threats in the Indo-Pacific"; Jaspardo and Taylor. "Climate Change and Regional Vulnerability to Transnational Security Threats in Southeast Asia"; Vision of Humanity. "Ecological Threat Register." *Ecological Threat Register*. 2022.

<https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/ecological-threat-report/#/>.

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also facilitates the creation of interoperability between nations. This is crucial because HADR and SAR operations often require collaboration between nations.⁸⁵ Through an official press release, the Indonesian Military Headquarters explicitly expressed the hope that ASEX could create ASEAN interoperability in disaster management.⁸⁶ Admiral Margono explicitly stated that ASEX 2023 has the potential to enhance capabilities in various aspects:

"Let us continue collaborating and dedicating ourselves to maintaining peace and stability in the ASEAN region. Through this training, we have had the chance to refine our skills, assess our strengths, and identify weaknesses within the military forces of our friendly nations. Together, we can collaborate to address and strengthen these skills, enhancing our readiness to face any challenges that may arise in the future."⁸⁷

In addition to efforts to enhance capabilities in dealing with various non-traditional threats, as mentioned earlier, ASEX 2023 also brings about other positive impacts on ASEAN's military capabilities. The increased interoperability through these joint military exercises can be utilized when an armed conflict between China and Taiwan occurs. During such a conflict, ASEAN

⁸⁵ Mayberry. "'Baby Steps' for ASEAN as It Wraps up First-Ever Joint Military Drills"; Yaacob. "ASEAN's First Joint Military Exercise."

⁸⁶ Puspen TNI. "Latihan Interoperabilitas Penanganan Bencana. ASEX -01 Tumbuhkan Soliditas ASEAN."

⁸⁷ RRI. "Asex 01-Natuna Kunci Keberhasilan Jaga Perdamaian Kawasan ASEAN."

governments would undoubtedly strive to repatriate their citizens from the conflict area. This is similar to actions taken by various countries during the Russia-Ukraine war.⁸⁸ In the scenario of a China-Taiwan war, ASEAN countries, especially Indonesia, need to collaborate in repatriating their citizens. This is due to the large number of citizens that need to be evacuated. Currently, it is estimated that there are more than 730,000 ASEAN citizens working in Taiwan.⁸⁹ Specifically for Indonesia, the recorded number of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Taiwan is 267,194⁹⁰. The large number of citizens working in Taiwan increases the likelihood of a joint ASEAN HADR mission.⁹¹

IX. ASEX 2023: Indonesia and ASEAN Pursuit for International Reputation

The final motive for a country to engage in defense diplomacy, especially through joint military exercises, is to gain a positive international reputation. Particularly for Indonesia, the

⁸⁸ Laotian Times. "ASEAN Countries Rush to Evacuate Their Citizens in Ukraine." Laotian Times. March 9, 2022.
<https://laotiantimes.com/2022/03/09/which-asean-countries-have-evacuated-the-ir-citizens-in-ukraine/>.

⁸⁹ Yaacob. "ASEAN's First Joint Military Exercise."

⁹⁰ KDEI Taipei. "KDEI TAIPEI KEMBALI GELAR RAKOR PENINGKATAN PELINDUNGAN PMI DI TAIWAN." KDEI Taipei - Kantor Dagang dan Ekonomi Indonesia. November 15, 2023.
<https://www.kdei-taipei.org/news/kdei-taipei-kembali-gelar-rakor-peningkatan-pelindungan-pmi-di-taiwan-2448.html>.

⁹¹ Yaacob. "ASEAN's First Joint Military Exercise."

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motive of enhancing international reputation holds significant importance in defense diplomacy efforts.⁹² Indonesia has been actively working in recent years to improve its reputation and prestige on the international stage, particularly as a regional leader.⁹³ This effort is rooted in the negative reputation of Indonesia, especially the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), during the New Order era. During that time, the TNI was accused of committing several human rights violations and supporting the authoritarian regime of President Suharto.⁹⁴ Consequently, Indonesia utilizes joint military exercises such as Garuda Shield, Sharp Knife, and Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo as means to enhance its international reputation, at least within the region.⁹⁵

⁹² Inkiriwang. "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?"

⁹³ Evi Fitriani. "Yudhoyono's Foreign Policy: Is Indonesia a Rising Power?." in *The Yudhoyono Presidency: Indonesia's Decade of Stability and Stagnation*. ed. Edward Aspinall. Marcus Mietzner. and Dirk Tomsa (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. 2015). 1–362.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2015.1111793>; I Gusti Bagus Dharma Agastia and Anak Agung Banyu Perwita. "Jokowi's Maritime Axis: Change and Continuity of Indonesia's Role in Indo-Pacific." *JAS (Journal of ASEAN Studies)* 3. no. 1 (July 30, 2015): 32. <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v3i1.751>.

⁹⁴ Amnesty International. "Indonesia: Power and Impunity: Human Rights under the New Order." Amnesty International. July 21, 1994. <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/amnesty/1994/en/91506>.

⁹⁵ Inkiriwang. "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?"; Inkiriwang. "'Garuda Shield' vs 'Sharp Knife': Operationalising Indonesia's Defence Diplomacy."

Considering the use of joint military exercises by other nations to improve international reputation, Indonesia's initiation of ASEX 2023 is driven by the same motive. The ASEX 2023, being the first joint military exercise involving all ASEAN member states, can significantly elevate Indonesia's international reputation. Indonesia demonstrates to the global audience that it can unite the Southeast Asian nations amidst existing mutual distrust and the influence of external powers such as China and the United States.

Apart from enhancing international reputation, ASEX 2023 brings additional positive impacts related to Indonesia's international standing. These positive impacts are closely linked to Indonesia's status within ASEAN. Indonesia has long been recognized as a leader among the Southeast Asian nations.⁹⁶ Indonesia's leadership extends beyond their ASEAN Chairmanship, earning it the label of a natural leader within ASEAN.⁹⁷ The

⁹⁶ I. Gusti Bagus Dharma Agastia. "Understanding Indonesia's Role in the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific': A Role Theory Approach." *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 7. no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 293–305.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.308>; Agastia and Perwita. "Jokowi's Maritime Axis: Change and Continuity of Indonesia's Role in Indo-Pacific"; Ralf Emmers. "Indonesia's Role in ASEAN: A Case of Incomplete and Sectorial Leadership." *The Pacific Review* 27. no. 4 (August 8, 2014): 543–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2014.924230>; Indraswari. "ASEAN Centrality: Comparative Case Study of Indonesia Leadership"; Pattharapong Rattanaseevee. "Leadership in ASEAN: The Role of Indonesia Reconsidered." *Asian Journal of Political Science* 22. no. 2 (2014): 113–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2014.895912>.

⁹⁷ Emmers. "Indonesia's Role in ASEAN: A Case of Incomplete and Sectorial Leadership."

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success of Indonesia in initiating ASEX 2023 reaffirms its leadership role in ASEAN. This is explicitly stated by Admiral Yudho Margono, the Chief of the Indonesian National Defense Forces (TNI), during the Subject Military Expert Exchange (SMEE) as part of ASEX 2023:

“It is an undeniable fact that Indonesia, given its geographical and demographic significance, stands as the largest country in the region. Consequently, it is only appropriate for Indonesia to assume the roles of being central, protective, and a unifying force for the nations in the region, much like the authentic representation of a mother figure in the ASEAN region, or the mother of ASEAN.”⁹⁸

The positive impact on international reputation resulting from the implementation of ASEX 2023 extends beyond Indonesia; it also benefits ASEAN as a regional organization. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, some experts view ASEAN cooperation as ineffective.⁹⁹ Additionally, there is a perception that the presence of competition between the United States and China weakens the solidarity of ASEAN members,

⁹⁸ Fahmi Firdaus. “Gagas Asex-01 Natuna. Panglima TNI: Indonesia Menjadi Pelindung Dan Pemersatu Negara ASEAN.” Okezone. September 20, 2023. <https://nasional.okezone.com/read/2023/09/20/337/2886274/gagas-asex-01-natuna-panglima-tni-indonesia-menjadi-pelindung-dan-pemersatu-negara-asean>.

⁹⁹ Beeson. “Multilateralism in East Asia: Less than the Sum of Its Parts?”; Beeson. “ASEAN’s Ways: Still Fit for Purpose?”

raising questions about ASEAN's future.¹⁰⁰ Through the successful execution of ASEX 2023, attended by all member states, ASEAN sends a signal to the international community that it can maintain solidarity and continue to progress. Thomas Daniel, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Malaysia, stated that ASEX 2023 is a crucial moment for ASEAN.¹⁰¹

X. ASEX 2023: ASEAN's "Shaping" and "Traditional"

Use of Military Power

In the previous discussions utilizing the concept of defense diplomacy, ASEX 2023 has proven to be a highly significant defense diplomacy strategy for Indonesia as the initiator and other ASEAN member states. This is because ASEX 2023 serves as an instrument for strategic engagement, confidence-building measures, capacity building, and the enhancement of Indonesia's and ASEAN's international reputation. However, the benefits sought through ASEX 2023 are not limited to these four aspects alone. When combined with an analysis using the typology of joint military exercises presented by Wolfley (2021), a more

¹⁰⁰ Le Thu. "China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement towards ASEAN."

¹⁰¹ Mayberry. "'Baby Steps' for ASEAN as It Wraps up First-Ever Joint Military Drills."

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comprehensive understanding of the ASEX 2023 event can be achieved.

As previously mentioned, ASEX 2023 is a non-combat military exercise. However, this does not categorize ASEX 2023 solely under the “Shaping” use of military power. This joint military exercise is also part of the “traditional” use of military power. Within the “traditional” use of military power, ASEX 2023 falls into the “rehearsal” type. This is because, as explained by Wolfley (2021), multilateral military exercises under this type are conducted with the aim of improving effectiveness and the potential for successful joint operations with partner countries.¹⁰² This aligns with the reality that ASEAN countries, in the future, will greatly benefit from joint operations in HADR, SAR, and Maritime Security missions.¹⁰³ Therefore, through the exercise content of ASEX 2023, ASEAN militaries can better understand each other's strengths and weaknesses, thereby enhancing interoperability.¹⁰⁴

ASEX 2023 can also be categorized under the three other types of multilateral military exercises that fall under the “shaping”

¹⁰² Wolfley. “Military Statecraft and the Use of Multinational Exercises in World Politics.”

¹⁰³ Mayberry. “‘Baby Steps’ for ASEAN as It Wraps up First-Ever Joint Military Drills”; Puspen TNI. “Latihan Interoperabilitas Penanganan Bencana. ASEX -01 Tumbuhkan Soliditas ASEAN”; Yaacob. “ASEAN’s First Joint Military Exercise.”

¹⁰⁴ Puspen TNI. “Latihan Interoperabilitas Penanganan Bencana. ASEX -01 Tumbuhkan Soliditas ASEAN.”

use of military power. These three types are “recruitment,” “capacity building,” and “trust-developing.”¹⁰⁵ ASEX 2023 can be considered a “recruitment” type, as seen from Indonesia's efforts to ensure the participation of all ASEAN member states. As mentioned earlier, Indonesia, as the initiator and host, was willing to relocate the ASEX 2023 event to avoid objections from Cambodia and Myanmar.¹⁰⁶ The recruitment effort is further evident in statements made by Admiral Yudho Margono during the closing ceremony of ASEX 2023. In his speech, Admiral Margono stated that through ASEX 2023, ASEAN demonstrates to the world that it is a united family ready to protect regional interests.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, during the same occasion, Admiral Margono expressed optimism that ASEAN's unity would lead to greater progress:

"Let's uphold a culture of open and sustained communication among us, fostering an environment for continual learning as we address various challenges. I look forward to future encounters in similar training sessions, and let's continue our collective effort

¹⁰⁵ Wolfley. “Military Statecraft and the Use of Multinational Exercises in World Politics.”

¹⁰⁶ Markas Besar TNI. “Jelang Latihan Bersama Militer ASEAN. Mabes TNI Siapkan Skenario Latihan”; Mayberry. “‘Baby Steps’ for ASEAN as It Wraps up First-Ever Joint Military Drills”; Yaacob. “ASEAN’s First Joint Military Exercise.”

¹⁰⁷ RRI. “Asex 01-Natuna Kunci Keberhasilan Jaga Perdamaian Kawasan ASEAN.”

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for a stronger and more united ASEAN. I am optimistic that our unity will lead us to even greater progress.¹⁰⁸”

ASEX 2023 can also be categorized as a “capacity-building” type of multilateral military exercise. As mentioned earlier, through the exercises conducted in ASEX 2023, ASEAN countries are striving to enhance their military capabilities in Maritime Security, HADR, and SAR operations. This aligns with the character of multilateral military exercises under the “capacity building” type as presented by Wolfley. Through ASEX 2023, ASEAN countries can improve their ability to independently address non-traditional threats present in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, by enhancing interoperability, ASEAN will be better equipped to conduct joint operations in the future. The motive behind joint military exercises in the framework of defense diplomacy is to build mutual trust, ASEX 2023 can also be classified as a “trust-building” type of multilateral military exercise. ASEX 2023, initiated by Indonesia, emerges in the context of existing distrust among ASEAN member states. The potential for conflict arising from sovereignty disputes and residual conflicts from the past is expected to be mitigated through the interactions facilitated by joint military exercises.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Wolfley. “Military Statecraft and the Use of Multinational Exercises in World Politics.”

XI. Last But Not Least: ASEX 2023 as ASEAN's Institutional Hedging Strategy

Through analysis utilizing the concepts of Defense Diplomacy and the typology of joint military exercises as previously outlined, the significance of ASEX 2023 for Indonesia and ASEAN becomes apparent. However, this article does not stop at this explanation. The author argues that the implementation of ASEX 2023 has become part of the foreign policy strategy of ASEAN countries in facing international political dynamics. As commonly known, Southeast Asia has recently come under international spotlight for at least three interwoven reasons.

First, Southeast Asian countries are currently confronted with the emergence of a regional powerhouse named China. Over the past few years, China has transformed into a new major force in Asia and even globally, in both economic and military aspects. Secondly, in parallel with China's rise as a new powerhouse, Beijing's foreign policy has become increasingly provocative and assertive. This can be seen in China's unilateral claims in the South China Sea, which not only contradict the UNCLOS 1982 but also lead to disputes and tensions with ASEAN countries. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam are ASEAN countries embroiled in disputes with China in the South China Sea. China has further demonstrated its assertiveness by

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constructing artificial islands in the South China Sea, subsequently using them as military bases. Thirdly, there is a power and influence rivalry between China and the United States along with its allies in the region. The competition between these two major powers in the ASEAN backyard has significant implications for ASEAN countries across economic, defense, and political sectors.

Faced with these conditions, ASEAN countries undoubtedly need to pursue the right foreign policy strategy. Balancing against China is a very difficult option for ASEAN countries due to the vast disparities in military and economic power between ASEAN countries and China.¹¹⁰ Such wide disparities in power make the likelihood of successfully balancing against China very low. The low likelihood of success in balancing theoretically leads countries to refrain from balancing.¹¹¹

In addition to balancing, the option of bandwagoning is also not ideal for ASEAN countries. This is because ASEAN countries need to maintain relationships with both China and the United States simultaneously. As is known, China is currently one of ASEAN's largest trading and economic partners. According to

¹¹⁰ Gindarsah. "Strategic Hedging in Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy."

¹¹¹ Jason W Davidson. "The Roots of Revisionism: Fascist Italy. 1922-39." *Security Studies* 11. no. 4 (2002): 125–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/714005356>; Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu. "After Unipolarity: China's Vision of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline." *International Security* 36. no. 1 (2011): 41–72.

official releases from ASEAN and the Chinese government, both have become each other's major trading and economic partners. China has become ASEAN's largest trading partner and the third-largest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for ASEAN, only behind the United States and the European Union.¹¹² However, at the same time, ASEAN countries also have significant dependencies on the United States from both economic and defense perspectives. In terms of defense, for example, the United States is the second-largest producer or supplier of weapons to ASEAN countries. Singapore serves as an example. Singapore has long been known as one of the United States' key strategic partners in Southeast Asia. The United States is the largest producer of weapons for Singapore, accounting for 54.1% of its total weapons.¹¹³ However, according to data from The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), China is Singapore's main trading partner.¹¹⁴ China's FDI flow into Singapore is also the largest compared to other ASEAN countries.¹¹⁵ Therefore, if ASEAN chooses to adopt a

¹¹² ASEAN. "ASEAN-China Economic Relation." ASEAN. 2023. <https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/integration-with-global-economy/asean-china-economic-relation/>; Ministry of Commerce of the Peoples Republic of China. "2022 Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment" (Beijing. 2023).

¹¹³ Siemon T Wezeman. "Arms Flows to South East Asia" (Stockholm. 2019).

¹¹⁴ OEC. "Singapore (SGP) Exports. Imports. and Trade Partners." The Observatory of Economic Complexity. 2024.

<https://oec.world/en/profile/country/sgp?yearlyTradeFlowSelector=flow1>.

¹¹⁵ Arendse Huld. "The Rise of Chinese Capital: Impact on ASEAN's Manufacturing Landscape." ASEAN Briefing. November 21, 2023.

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bandwagoning strategy by siding with one party, the country potentially stands to lose potential benefits from the other party. Meanwhile, the benefits gained by ASEAN countries are substantial and necessary for development.

Given that these two strategic options are not ideal or feasible for ASEAN countries, the most rational and feasible strategy is hedging. Hedging can be simply understood as a country's effort to maintain good relations without appearing to favor one country or political bloc over another. This strategy is pursued to maximize benefits from both sides without being under the influence of one side or losing benefits by favoring a single powerful country or bloc.¹¹⁶ Hedging, as a strategy, has been widely discussed in various literature as a strategy commonly used by ASEAN countries in facing China's increasing power and the competition between China and the United States.¹¹⁷

<https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/the-rise-of-chinese-capital-impact-on-asean-manufacturing-landscape/#>.

¹¹⁶ Goh. "Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies"; Kuik. "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China."

¹¹⁷ Anwar. "Indonesia's Hedging plus Policy in the Face of China's Rise and the US-China Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific Region"; Gindarsah. "Strategic Hedging in Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy"; Kuik. "Hedging via Institutions: ASEAN-Led Multilateralism in the Age of the Indo-Pacific"; Oba. "Further Development of Asian Regionalism: Institutional Hedging in an Uncertain Era"; Yuzhu Wang. "Hedging Strategy: Concept, Behavior, and Implications for China-ASEAN Relations." East Asian Affairs 01. no. 02 (December 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1142/s2737557921500121>; I. Gede Wahyu Wicaksana and Moch Faisal Karim. "How Regional Organisation Survives: ASEAN. Hedging

As one of ASEAN's new cooperation programs, this article argues that ASEX 2023 is an institutional hedging manifestation within ASEAN. This is because ASEX 2023 fulfills the typical characteristics of institutional hedging. According to Kuik (2022), there are at least three typical characteristics of institutional hedging: (1) aiming to mitigate and offset a broad range of risks, (2) impartiality and inclusivity, and (3) efforts to mitigate risks through binding, buffering, and building.¹¹⁸ ASEX 2023, as previously mentioned, is ASEAN's effort to mitigate and prepare for various risks such as natural disasters and the need for evacuating citizens outside the ASEAN region. This is in line with the first characteristic of institutional hedging.

ASEX 2023 also meets the second criterion by showcasing the organisation's neutrality and non-discrimination when not engaging either the United States or China, two rival powers vying for influence in Southeast Asia. ASEX 2023 conveys that ASEAN is not subservient to or an affiliate of either power. Additionally, ASEX 2023 also exhibits inclusivity by being a joint military exercise participated by all ASEAN member states for the first time. Countries that have been traditionally close to China, such as Myanmar and Cambodia, as well as those with close ties with the United States, such as Singapore and the Philippines, all

and International Society.” *Contemporary Politics* 29, no. 5 (2023): 659–79.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2023.2216031>.

¹¹⁸ Kuik. “Hedging via Institutions: ASEAN-Led Multilateralism in the Age of the Indo-Pacific.”

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took part. Furthermore, ASEX 2023 aligns with all the third characteristic of institutional hedging. Although Kuik (2022) explains that binding in institutional hedging is directed towards forces outside the organization,¹¹⁹ ASEX 2023 can also be seen as an internal binding effort. This is because all ASEAN countries are involved regardless of their ideologies, interests, or political closeness to China or the United States. ASEX 2023 also represents ASEAN's efforts in building by continuously enhancing cooperation mechanisms within the institution. ASEX 2023 marks a monumental milestone in ASEAN defense cooperation. The significance of ASEX 2023 as an internal binding and building effort becomes increasingly crucial considering the current weakening of the ASEAN Centrality principle due to China's increasing influence and its competition with the United States.¹²⁰ Finally, ASEX 2023 also serves as an effort of ASEAN's buffering or dominance-denial amidst the competition between the two powers by not involving either of them in the exercise

XII. Conclusion

ASEAN, as a regional cooperation institution in Southeast Asia, continues to undergo development. The implementation of

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Le Thu. "China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement towards ASEAN."

the ASEAN Solidarity Exercise (ASEX) 2023, a joint military exercise, marks a monumental development for ASEAN, particularly in the defense sector. ASEX 2023 is the first joint military exercise participated in by all ASEAN member states and without the presence of extra-regional countries. Initiated by Indonesia, the staging of ASEX 2023 holds significant importance for both Indonesia and ASEAN. ASEX 2023 has proven to be an instrument of defense diplomacy and a recruitment and rehearsal effort in preparing for potential joint military operations in the future. However, more than that, ASEX 2023 can also be seen as an institutional hedging strategy by ASEAN in facing the competition between China and the United States in the region. Through ASEX 2023, ASEAN can strengthen institutional bonds and cooperation, as well as the principle of ASEAN Centrality, which has weakened due to the increasing influence of China in the region.

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Foreign Policy
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Abstract

This article discusses British foreign policy towards Turkey during World War II (1939–1945). The outbreak of the war marked a significant shift in Britain's approach to Turkey, transitioning from a pre-war focus on economic relations to a wartime emphasis on political and strategic considerations. This study explores the rationale behind Britain's diplomatic engagement with Turkey and assesses the impact of British efforts to shape Turkish foreign policy during the conflict. Using a

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qualitative methodology based on content analysis, this article draws upon British archival sources from the Public Record Office (PRO) and other library resources. The findings indicate that Turkey's strategic location at the crossroads of key global regions made it a crucial player in the wartime balance of power. Control over Turkish territory, particularly the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits, had direct implications for military strategies in the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Middle East. Consequently, Britain's primary objective was to prevent Turkey from aligning with the Axis powers and to ensure its continued cooperation or, at minimum, its neutrality. To achieve this, Britain employed a range of diplomatic, economic, and military strategies. Diplomatic efforts included treaties and negotiations aimed at securing Turkish cooperation, while economic measures such as trade agreements and military aid were designed to strengthen British influence. At the same time, Britain sought to reassure Turkey of its security concerns while countering potential German influence in the region. Although Turkey maintained its neutrality for much of the war, British diplomatic efforts played a role in its eventual decision to join the Allies in 1945. This study concludes that British foreign policy towards Turkey was primarily driven by strategic and defensive considerations. Turkey's geopolitical significance made it essential for Britain to engage diplomatically to secure regional stability. The evolution of British-Turkish relations during the war highlights the broader geopolitical challenges faced by Britain in

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securing its interests. By maintaining Turkey's neutrality and gradually influencing its alignment, Britain was able to protect its strategic position and contribute to the wider Allied war effort. The case of British foreign policy towards Turkey illustrates the complexities of wartime diplomacy and the significance of strategic partnerships in shaping global conflict outcomes.

Keywords: World War II, Foreign policy, British, Turkey, Strategic

I. Introduction

The relationship between Britain and Turkey during the Second World War, from 1939 to 1945, marked a significant chapter in the wider history of British diplomacy, especially in the context of great power rivalries over strategically important regions. Although the ties between the two countries had been cultivated since the sixteenth century and had grown steadily throughout the nineteenth century based on shared strategic interests, the onset of global war gave new urgency to Britain's engagement with Turkey. This was largely driven by Turkey's physical geography, which had a direct impact on military planning and foreign policy formulation.

Turkey's strategic value lay in its unique geographical position at the crossroads of Southeastern Europe and Western Asia. The country controlled two crucial maritime straits, the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, which connect the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. These narrow waterways served not only as key economic and military corridors but also as gateways to the southern border of the Soviet Union. In this sense, whoever controlled or influenced Turkey could potentially shape the flow of military and commercial traffic into and out of the Black Sea. In geopolitical terms, understood as the influence of geography on political and strategic decisions, Turkey held the capacity to

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enable or restrict regional dominance across the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East.¹

By early 1939, following Germany's occupation of Czechoslovakia and the worsening security environment in Europe, British policymakers began to recognize that Turkey's alignment would be crucial in determining the course of Axis expansion. Turkey's location made it a natural bulwark against the southward movement of German forces into the Balkans, as well as a key to safeguarding Allied access to oil-producing regions in Western Asia.² Thus, the physical features of Turkey's geography directly shaped British diplomatic priorities, as the country stood at the centre of a potential conflict zone linking Central Europe, the Soviet Union, and the Middle East.³

At the same time, Turkey was still in the process of consolidating its national recovery after the trauma of previous conflicts. Preserving territorial integrity and political independence remained its foremost priority. To achieve this, Ankara adopted a policy of active neutrality, maintaining relations with both Allied and Axis powers while avoiding formal alliances.

¹ Mustafar Bilgin, *Britain and Turkey in The Middle East*. United Kingdom (Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), 9-11.

² Enh, A.M. *Balkan war 2 in 1913 and the diplomacy of the Great Powers: Analysis from the British documents*. Tamkang Journal of International Affairs, 2016, 20(1): 95 – 138.

³ Enh, A.M., Bin Awg Lah, M.N.H., Mansor, S., Othman, *Russia-Ukraine conflict: An analysis of geopolitical alignments in Asian countries*. International Journal of Advanced and Applied Sciences, 2024, 10(10): 86–93

Though Italy posed the most immediate military threat in the Mediterranean, Turkish leaders were more concerned about the long-term intentions of the Soviet Union, which shared land borders with Turkey along the north and east. In this context, Turkey began to seek explicit security guarantees from the Allied powers, particularly from Britain.⁴

Within British strategic planning circles, especially in the Admiralty, Turkey's importance was repeatedly highlighted. Internal assessments noted that Britain often failed to grasp the full extent of its reliance on Turkey's cooperation. One such view stated plainly that *"we often fail to realise that we need Turkey more than Turkey needs us."*⁵ Turkey's control over the straits, its proximity to critical oil resources, and its vulnerability to potential German or Soviet advances combined to make it an essential element in Britain's wartime calculations.⁶ Consequently, British foreign policy towards Turkey was increasingly shaped by the strategic imperatives imposed by the region's geography.

⁴ Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain's Moment in The Middle East 1914-1956*, (London, Chatto & Windus, 1963), 16.

⁵ Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in The Second World War*. London, (University of Oxford London, 1970), 211.

⁶ Mansor, S.A., Enh, A.M., Mansor, S., Othman, A.-A. The Implications of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878 on the Muslim Minorities in Bulgaria: Reports from the British Documents. *Global Journal Al Thaqafah*, 2024, 14(1), pp. 33–48.

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II. Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study adopts a qualitative approach based on content analysis. As this is a historical study, the primary research relies predominantly on first-hand sources. The principal archival materials used in this research are obtained from the National Archives of the United Kingdom, which serve as the main reference. Key sources include files from the Foreign Office (FO), Cabinet Papers (CAB), Ministry of Defence Files (DEFE), War Office Files (WO), Ministry of Information Files (INF), Government Code and Cypher School Files (HW1), and the Private Papers of Eden (1935–1946). Additionally, several unpublished archival documents have also been consulted.

This study further incorporates an examination and interpretation of sources acquired from various academic institutions, including the Tun Seri Lanang Library at the National University of Malaysia (UKM), the Library of Malay Civilization, and the Resource Centre for the Study of History, Politics, and Strategy at UKM. The majority of primary materials consist of treaty documents, official correspondence, meeting minutes, and reports from Foreign Office officials concerning British-Turkish relations between 1942 and 1945. Public sources such as books, memoirs, and newspapers—predominantly written by politicians, diplomats, and government officials—are equally crucial in

understanding the issues under study (Enh & Samak, 2020). Additionally, academic sources, including monographs and journal articles, have been extensively utilized.

This study also refers to documents from prominent international affairs institutions, particularly the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Notable references include *Documents on International Affairs, 1951* (Oxford University Press, 1954), *Documents on International Affairs, 1952* (Oxford University Press, 1955), *Documents on International Affairs, 1953* (Oxford University Press, 1956), *Survey of International Affairs, 1951* (Oxford University Press, 1954), *Survey of International Affairs, 1952* (Oxford University Press, 1955), and *Survey of International Affairs, 1953* (Oxford University Press, 1956). Furthermore, online journal articles and several theses from previous scholars have been consulted to enhance the understanding of this subject matter.

III. Britain's Foreign Policy Priorities Regarding Nearby Regions

During the onset of World War II in 1939, the British policy towards Turkey underwent a marked transformation. Preceding the Second World War, British interest in fostering relations with Turkey was primarily economically oriented, with less emphasis on political aspects. However, amid the unfolding of World War II, the emphasis shifted dramatically towards defense and strategic

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concerns in cultivating ties with Turkey. At the war's outset, Turkey opted to maintain a stance of neutrality, refraining from aligning with either the Allied or Axis powers. Nevertheless, the British persisted in cultivating positive relations with Turkey and consistently extended offers for the country to join the Allied cause. This pursuit stemmed from Turkey's geographical location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, imparting significant strategic importance to both the Allied and Axis blocs.⁷ Complete control over Turkish territory could influence strategies and defense capabilities within the region.

Moreover, the Turkish control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits served as vital passageways connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Mastery over these straits conferred strategic advantages to any bloc in command, enabling the regulation of both commercial and military vessel traffic. Additionally, Turkey boasted a pivotal naval base in the city of İzmir.⁸ The British perceived Turkey as a nation offering strategic advantages during the war and deemed it crucial to ensure Turkey's alignment as an ally during this critical period. Therefore, the British viewed Turkey not merely as a neutral country during a critical moment of the war, but as a strategic asset with the potential to determine the balance of power in the

⁷ Mustafar Bilgin. *Britain and Turkey in The Middle East*. United Kingdom. (Bloomsbury Academic. 2008). 31-32.

⁸ Mustafar Bilgin. *Britain and Turkey in The Middle East*. United Kingdom. (Bloomsbury Academic. 2008). 38-39.

Mediterranean and Balkan regions. Turkey's position between the main axes of conflict enabled it to serve as a defensive bulwark against German incursions into the Middle East as well as a barrier to the expansion of Soviet influence. On this basis, British leaders concluded that ensuring Turkey's alignment or at the very least, a pro-British neutrality, was a critical foreign policy necessity, not because of the timing of the war itself, but due to Turkey's irreplaceable geostrategic value.

While Turkey did not formally join the Allied bloc at the war's outset, Turkish authorities maintained diplomatic relations with Britain and the United States while fortifying their own defenses. Turkey adhered staunchly to its policy of neutrality and non-involvement in direct combat during the conflict. This is evidenced by the fact that Turkey did not declare war on any party during the majority of the conflict, from 1939 until early 1945. Despite facing diplomatic and economic pressure from both the Allied and Axis powers, Turkey consistently refused to enter the war and maintained its official stance of neutrality until 1945.⁹ However, both the Allied and Axis powers endeavored to sway Turkey to align with their respective causes. Both blocs engaged in a race to secure political and military support from Turkey. Despite Turkey maintaining its neutral stance throughout the war, it strategically utilized this position to bolster its strength and reap

⁹ Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, The Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1955), 667.

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benefits from both blocs. Nevertheless, regarding the significance of fostering relations with Turkey, the British persisted in their efforts to court Turkey as an ally. The importance of this strategic position was reiterated by eminent Middle Eastern historian Albert Hourani, who stated:

...to control the Middle East is a necessity for any Power which want to extend its influence from one continent or sea to another, to joint forces with another Power who centre of influence lies in another continent or sea, or to prevent some other Power any of those things. This importance it has retained and probably will retain whatever changes take place in the distribution of world power.¹⁰

Therefore, according to this statement, the primary interests for the British in fostering relations with Turkey during World War II were the defense advantages and the strategic position held by Turkey. Therefore, one of the initial steps taken by the British was the signing of the Ankara Agreement of 1939 between Britain, France, and Turkey on 19 October 1939. This agreement marked the first phase of Turkey's neutrality policy with a pro-British inclination from 1939 to 1941.¹¹

¹⁰ Albert Hourani. *Great Britain and The Arab World*. (London. John Murray Press. 1945). 32.

¹¹ FO 371/23747, European situation: Declaration Anglo-Franco-Turkish Treaty. Code 67 File 661 (papers 7261 - 8264), 19 October 1939.

A. The defense significance for the British military

One of the primary interests of British foreign policy towards Turkey during World War II was defense.¹² Turkey's geographical position, bridging three major continents Europe, Asia, and the Middle East rendered it an ideal territory for British defensive fortification to impede Axis military advances. For instance, Turkey's access to both the Mediterranean and Black Seas allowed the British to control Axis troop movements arriving from the Mediterranean direction. Control over the Mediterranean and Black Seas during the war was crucial as these water bodies served as vital supply routes and connected Axis forces with their allies in the Mediterranean and North Africa.¹³ Furthermore, Turkey's geographical location provided access to block Axis troop movements via land routes, such as through Balkan defenses, to thwart incursions from Axis allies in the Balkans like Italy and Bulgaria. Therefore, this section will discuss the defense significance for the British military, namely obtaining military assistance from Balkan nations, blocking German incursions into the Mediterranean, improving Russo-Turkish relations, and impeding Italian troop movements into the Balkan region.

¹² Al-hakim, M., Enh, A.M. & Mansor S. Tun Abdul Razak in His Efforts to Establish Diplomatic Relations with The People's Republic of China. *Tamkang Journal of International Affairs*. 2023, 27 (1) : 111-162.

¹³ Stanford J. Shaw. *Turkey and the Holocaust: Turkey's Role in Rescuing Turkish and European Jewry from Nazi Persecution. 1933-1945*. (New York. New York University Press. 1993). 52-55.

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B. Obtaining Military Assistance from Balkan Nations

Gaining a foothold in the Balkans during World War II constituted a defense advantage highly contested by both the Axis and Allied blocs. This was due to the Balkans' strategic position between Central Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean. Control over this region would afford dominance over crucial maritime trade between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Commanding these routes facilitated efficient transportation of supplies and troops across various theaters of war. Additionally, the Balkans served as a primary gateway to the Mediterranean region.¹⁴ The British, with a strategic interest in maintaining control over the Mediterranean and safeguarding their maritime trade routes, greatly relied on assistance from Balkan nations. By securing support from Balkan nations, the British aimed to strengthen their position in defending the Mediterranean and prevent Axis forces from entering this vital area. Turkey, as an influential nation in the Balkans, implied that by gaining a position in Turkey, the British indirectly gained a foothold in the Balkans. Consequently, the British government planned to establish an Allied defensive stronghold in the Balkans to impede Axis troop movements.

However, this endeavor seemed rather implausible without support from Turkey and might arouse suspicion from Italy,

¹⁴ Sir Llewellyn Woodward. *British Foreign Policy in The Second World War*. (London. University of Oxford London. 1970). 61.

which at that time had yet to enter the war. Consequently, the British adopted a more prudent policy by appeasing Italy initially and attempting to minimize its hostility in terms of blockades, aiming to avoid actions that could force Italian Prime Minister Mussolini to choose between remaining neutral or aligning with Germany. Maintaining a secure position in Turkish territory was imperative as the Allied forces were expected to have troops either in Salonika or Istanbul, Turkey, to obstruct potential German incursions towards the Mediterranean or the Straits. Such forces would act as a buffer for the Balkan nations, which might either succumb to German demands or fail to unite against German aggression.¹⁵ British Prime Minister at that time, Arthur Neville Chamberlain, emphasized that the Allies could not take any action to impede German incursions through Yugoslavia because maintaining forces in Salonika or Istanbul would impose an enormous strain on Allied shipping and naval escort.¹⁶ This was because Salonika was not a suitable base or starting point for offensive operations, and under any circumstances, the use of any location would depend on the stances of Italy and Turkey. Moreover, it was impossible to reconcile the neutral Balkan bloc's plans with the presence of Allied forces in any Balkan nation. Hence, no decision was made except to “explore” this position through diplomatic channels in Rome and Ankara.

¹⁵ CAB 65/1/22. Minutes of The War Cabinet Meeting. (The National Archives. London. 21 September 1939)

¹⁶ CAB 65/1/22. Minutes of The War Cabinet Meeting. (The National Archives. London. 21 September 1939)

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At the outbreak of the war, Great Britain and Turkey were at the verge of finalizing a Mutual Aid Agreement. Historical negotiations indicate that Turkey had decided to deviate from its alliance policy with Germany and revert to its longstanding tradition of amicable relations with Great Britain. The decision to make this shift was made prior to the death of Atatürk in November 1938. President Ismet İnönü succeeded Atatürk as Turkey's second President and continued Atatürk's policies. Consequently, the Turkish government was prepared to join Great Britain in a declaration that both nations would formalize a long-term agreement. Furthermore, in the event of an invasion leading to warfare in the Mediterranean region, British and Turkish cooperation was pledged to fully assist and collaborate in resolving Mediterranean issues.¹⁷ Both governments also acknowledged the necessity of ensuring security in the Balkans and agreed to conduct joint negotiations with the aim of achieving this objective as swiftly as possible.

C. Blocking German Naval Movements to the Mediterranean

Turkey shares borders with the German Empire in Southeastern Europe and the Soviet Union to the north. Turkey's presence in this region is critical for monitoring German activities

¹⁷ CAB 79/8/23. Assistance to Turkey. Annex. Telegram from COS to Cs-in-C. Mediterranean and Middle East. COS (40)1006. 1026 & 1028. London. (The National Archives. 11 Dec 1940)

and limiting their potential expansion into this territory. Additionally, Turkey controls the Dardanelles Strait, a strategic maritime passage linking the Aegean Sea¹⁸ with the Black Sea. Despite being a neutral country and maintaining a neutral stance throughout the war, Turkey still regulated the movement of warships and military convoys through this strait. By exerting strict control over the Dardanelles, Turkey could impede the movement and supplies of Germany in the region. Based on Turkey's advantage in controlling this maritime route, the British perceived that Turkey could obstruct German naval movements into the Mediterranean if Turkey aligned with the Allies.¹⁹ Furthermore, the British could leverage Turkey's influence as a means to persuade Yugoslavia and Greece to engage in war while there was still a chance to counter German military advancements, thereby safeguarding themselves against potential future attacks. This strategic perspective emerged due to Yugoslavia and Greece sharing borders with Turkey, allowing the British to hinder German naval access to the Mediterranean through both maritime and land routes if all three countries Turkey, Yugoslavia, and Greece aligned with the British cause.

¹⁸ The Aegean Sea constitutes a part of the Mediterranean Sea. Situated between the Balkan Peninsula and Anatolia, it lies amidst the prominent lands of Greece and Turkey. It connects to the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea through the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits.

¹⁹ WO 106/3111. Anglo-Turkish staff conversations. (London. The National Archives 1939 June-1940 Jan. 1939).

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Germany clearly aimed for a swift and decisive victory. Hence, the British believed that such blockades might alleviate the situation in the west by disrupting German plans and providing time for defensive preparations. However, the Foreign Office did not deem this proposal practical, and the War Cabinet decided on June 13, 1940, to refrain from taking any action on the matter until they heard more about Turkey's stance. The rapid advancement of German troops in France and Turkey's delayed approval caused the Foreign Office to lean towards rejecting the proposal, even though Turkey had expressed readiness to consider it.²⁰ Although this decision only differed by a few weeks, the subsequent developments deviated significantly from the initial plans. France exited the war after succumbing to Germany on June 10, 1940, and Italy entered, rendering the Balkan nations incapable of resisting an attack, let alone initiating one. For reasons beyond the British government's control, Turkey did not fulfill the terms of the agreement it had made, assuming that if a conflict arose with Italy in the Balkans, the Turkish people would receive full British-French assistance.²¹

²⁰ CAB 84/22/37. The attitude of Turkey. Note by the Secretary. (London. The National Archives. 10 November 1940).

²¹ CAB 84/2/21. Action by France If the Full Weight of a German Offensive Falls On Great Britain. Meeting held on 18th March. 1940 at 3.30pm. (London. The National Archives. 1940).

D. Blocking Italian Military Movements

Eleven days after Italy's entry into the war, the Foreign Office took action by sending a circular telegram to all His Majesty's Missions. This telegram garnered attention as it addressed the questions raised in the House of Commons on June 19, 1940, regarding the British stance on Italy's position in Abyssinia and Albania. According to the telegram:

*...in view of the unprovoked entry of Italy into the war against this country, we held ourselves entitled to reserve full liberty of action in respect of any undertakings given by us in the past to the Italian Government concerning the Mediterranean, North or East African and Middle Eastern areas.*²²

The objective of this statement, elucidated in the telegram, was to liberate Britain from assumed commitments made in the past, particularly under the Anglo-Italian Agreement of 1938, without binding the British government to future obligations. Upon Italy's entry into the war, Sir H. Knatchbull-Hugessen was instructed to investigate whether the Turkish government was willing to take action in accordance with the Anglo-Franco-Turkish tripartite agreement to block the Italian military movements. Secretary of State Lord Halifax was directed

²² CAB 101/246. Printed set of personal telegrams. Prime Minister. (Churchill): 14 May-31 December 1940 (contains index). (London. The National Archives. 1940).

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to meet with the Turkish Ambassador on June 11, 1940, to discuss these measures.²³

On June 21, 1940, Sir H. Knatchbull-Hugessen was directed to propose to the Turkish government a modification of their declaration from “agreement with Great Britain” to “agreement with the Allies.” France’s withdrawal from the war would not affect Turkey’s obligations under that agreement, and the conflict in the Mediterranean involving France and Great Britain, envisaged under Article 2 of that agreement, had erupted prior to France’s defection.²⁴ However, it was evident that Turkey’s stance would not be determined by legal considerations, and Turkey was reluctant to refer to the Allies. The declaration eventually made by the Turkish Prime Minister during the National Assembly on June 26, 1940, stated that the Republic Government had taken into consideration the circumstances arising from Italy’s entry into the war and decided to invoke the provisions of Protocol 2, notifying its effect. Therefore, Turkey would maintain a non-belligerent stance at that time for the safety and defense of the Turkish state, continuing to enhance military preparedness. According to the Turkish Prime Minister, following

²³ HNKY 5/4. Correspondence with Lord Halifax. (London. The National Archives. 11 June 1940).

²⁴ CAB 65/5/14. Military Policy in the Middle East - Administrative preparations. (London. The National Archives. 21 June 1940).

this issue, the Turkish government should also remain more vigilant than before.²⁵

The Turkish government also asserted that, with this precautionary stance and by avoiding any provocation, Turkey would uphold security for their own nation and those in the surrounding regions.²⁶ This declaration thereby disregarded any reference to agreements with Great Britain or the hope that Turkey's non-belligerent nature was only temporary.²⁷ The paragraph about Turkey's military preparations fell far short of a mobilization notice or anything binding Italian forces as Italians. The general perception was that Turkey had shifted towards strict neutrality. However, the British government did not press the Turkish government to obtain a more satisfactory statement because Turkey's non-belligerent nature had also helped to hinder Italy from advancing further into the Balkan region.

²⁵ CAB 120/862. Personal telegrams between the Prime Minister and President Inonu. Turkey. (London. The National Archives. 26 June 1940).

²⁶ FO 371/25017/316. Turkish foreign relations and attitude towards European situation: earthquake in Turkey. Code 44 file 316 (papers 8242 - end). (London. The National Archives. 1940).

²⁷ FO 371/25017/316. Turkish foreign relations and attitude towards European situation: earthquake in Turkey. Code 44 file 316 (papers 8242 - end). (London. The National Archives. 1940).

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**IV. The Ways In Which Turkey's Geography Influenced
British Decisions**

Throughout World War II, in addition to defense interests, Turkey's importance to the British was also evident through its strategic geographical position situated at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Middle East which directly affected the operational and logistical considerations of the Allied forces. As a member of the Allied Powers, the British aimed to ensure Turkey's neutrality or alliance due to Turkey's strategic location bordering areas controlled by Germany, including Greece under German occupation. The British sought protection from German threats in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans. In this context, Turkey's strategic position served as a frontline in preventing German expansion southward and eastward. Moreover, Turkey possessed strategic military bases such as the Naval Base in İncirlik and the Air Base in Adana, which were crucial for the British in maintaining a military presence in the region.²⁸ These bases provided the British with a strong tactical position to conduct military operations and secure the Eastern Mediterranean region. The strategic importance also involved the placement of British troops in the Black Sea, controlling German influence in the Balkan region, and overseeing chrome supplies. Therefore, these strategic interests prompted the British to foster close

²⁸ Elizabeth Monroe. *Britain's Moment in The Middle East 1914-1956*. (London. Chatto & Windus. 1963) 72.

relations with Turkey during World War II, despite Turkey choosing to remain neutral and not actively engage in the conflict.

A. The Deployment of British Troops in the Black Sea

The significance of Turkey's involvement with the Allies during World War II was not only perceived as a robust defense against the blockade of enemy forces but also as a strategic position for the deployment of British military camps in the Black Sea. The importance of Turkey joining the war on the side of the Allies was once again emphasized by the British during the Moscow Conference held from September 28th to October 4th, 1941.²⁹ This conference involving three major powers the Soviet Union, the United States, and Great Britain commenced when British and American representatives arrived in Moscow on September 28th and concluded on October 4th. During this conference, the primary issues addressed to the British representatives initially focused on supply matters and subsequently considered the general strategic situation concerning the following aspects:

"The conference must proceed on the basis that the United States is not a warmonger. The burden on British manpower is

²⁹ WO 193/664. Moscow conference August-October 1941. (London. The National Archives. 1941).

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already heavy and the pressure will be intense in 1942 and beyond. Apart from the assistance which Britain receives from the Dominions, India and the Colonies, the manpower The British were also fully involved. The British also had to feed themselves and survive by maintaining a large merchant fleet in constant motion. superior, and also from the most dangerous form of air attack by the main strength of the enemy Air Force, which could be moved with rapidly from East to West at the convenience of the enemy. The Allies had to maintain their forces in the Middle East and hold a line from the Caspian to the Western Desert. The Allies hoped to develop on this front in 1942 about 25 divisions, British, Indian, and Dominion, which consisted of all the rear of the services required in this undeveloped area and a strong proportioned Air Force, about a million men. The strain on shipping supplied this force largely round the Cape, and the time taken in rounding the available vessels, should be explained, if necessary, in detail."³⁰

The British needed to establish military deployments in the Balkan region because a substantial number of British troops would take a considerable amount of time to reach the theater of war. Additionally, the British needed to defend other islands. For defense within the British Isles, the British had an army comprising over two million individuals, supported by

³⁰ WO 193/664. Moscow conference August-October 1941. (London. The National Archives. 1941).

approximately one and a half million armed Home Guard personnel. The British also possessed around three and a half million rifles, with a projected increase of 100,000 or more for the following year. Of the two million troops, 900,000 constituted the Field Force³¹, consisting of 20 mobile infantry divisions, 9 less mobile regional or coastal divisions, and 6 armored divisions, of which only three were partially formed, along with 5 army tank brigades, of which only one remained fully operational. Nearly one million individuals were needed for the sizable Air Force, with 750,000 already enlisted. The Navy had absorbed half a million sailors and marines to support its operations. When combined with these figures, the shipbuilding industry, aircraft production, ammunition manufacturing, and domestic food production requirements, among other public domestic industries, were all reduced to minimal levels. It is evident that the workforce, both male and female, available for a population of 44,000,000, is either currently at or soon to reach its limit. From the one million individuals supporting the Land Forces, Great Britain's Air Defense, Coastal Defense, the garrison in Northern Ireland, draft production units, and training schools to secure aerodromes and vulnerable locations, only a small margin remained. It would be impossible to substantially increase the Field Army within the country beyond the mentioned divisions,

³¹ The Field Force in military terminology refers to a combined armed land force operating under actual or assumed combat conditions, typically for a specific military campaign. While used by other nations, its interpretation may vary.

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less than forty in total, while significant efforts would be required to maintain the existing strength domestically and supply forces to the Middle East and Mediterranean.³²

Therefore, Turkey's involvement in these plans significantly contributes and could resolve numerous arising issues. Conversely, if Britain could secure Turkey, it would be considered a substantial advantage during the war. This is because not only would Germany's access to Syria and Egypt be obstructed by forces stationed in Turkey, but significant advantages in the Black Sea defense could be maintained, thereby aiding the defense of the Caucasus.³³ Turkey's course of action might soon be determined with promises that if Turkey engages in the conflict, aid in the form of troops and modern equipment, including aircraft support, armored vehicles, anti-tank shields, anti-aircraft artillery, among others, must be provided by the Allies. It should also be clarified to the Soviets that much of this equipment and a significant portion of troops would undoubtedly be diverted from the existing contribution to the Soviets to accommodate Turkey. However, to encourage Turkey's alignment with the Allies, especially in the near term, both Great Britain and the Soviet Union consider it worthwhile to reassess their war arrangement.

³² FO 371/30099. Naval and Military assistance to Turkey. Code 44 file 274 (to paper 8953). (London. The National Archives. 1941).

³³ WO 201/1072. Turkey: Strategic appreciations. (London. The National Archives. 1941).

However, there was no political issue discussed on September 29, 1941, during the review of the war arrangements. On September 30, 1941, Lord Beaverbrook, the British Minister of Aircraft Production, discussed aid to Therefore, the Allies needed to reassure Turkey in any way possible to gain the strategic advantage of troop placement in Turkish territory. Turkey, highlighting that certain propellants and projectiles unwanted by Stalin might influence Turkey's decisions.³⁴ Stalin concurred but remarked that Turkey wasn't acting like an ally, and the Allies must ensure that supplies from their side to Turkey wouldn't be lost. Lord Beaverbrook argued that British assistance might re-establish the alliance. According to Stalin in this context, Turkey feared Bulgaria due to Bulgaria's alliance with Germany and the potential aid Germany might provide.³⁵

B. Controlling German Influence in the Balkan Region

During lengthy negotiations between the British and Turkey prior to the outbreak of the German offensive in the Balkans, there were particular concerns on the British side as Germany also endeavored to persuade Turkey to join the Axis powers in the war. The main reason for this action was evident, as Germany also

³⁴ CAB 111/382. Civil supplies to Turkey. (London. The National Archives. 30 September 1941).

³⁵ FO 954/24B/531. Soviet Union: Foreign Office telegram to Moscow. No 2 ARGUS (from Lord Beaverbrook). (London. The National Archives. 1941).

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needed Turkish territory to serve as a defense for the Axis against the Allies' attacks. This situation raised concerns for the British as the complete surrender of Turkey to the Axis would escalate the wartime situation. In early March 1941, Germany made specific efforts to establish connections with the Turkish government. Hitler sent a personal message on March 4, 1941, through Herr von Papen, the German Ambassador in Ankara, to President İnönü. Hitler attempted to explain in this message that:

*...Germany had no territorial interest in the Balkans, and that she was concerned there only with measures to resist British attempts to secure a foothold in the European continent.*³⁶

Once these measures succeed, German troops will be withdrawn from Bulgaria and Romania. According to Hitler, Germany and Turkey require close economic cooperation, and there should be no opposition between the two countries regarding the post-war territorial arrangements. Therefore, Germany will not do anything to jeopardize Turkey as long as the Turkish people themselves do not take steps requiring a change in Germany's attitude. This German action baffled the British, leading them to take steps to entirely eliminate German influence in Turkey.

³⁶ FO 371/169550. Visit to Turkey of Herr von Papen. wartime German Ambassador. (London. The National Archives. 4 march 1941).

However, Turkey's reaction to this message seemed to satisfy the British when M. Saracoglu acted by showing Hitler's letter once to Sir H. Knatchbull-Hugessen, stating that Turkey would only respond to this message to 'fulfill a protocol requirement' alone. The Turkish government did not send a reply to Hitler until March 12th. The Turkish government subsequently expressed regret to Germany for Germany's failure to keep their promise not to invade the Balkans. Thus, the Turkish government gave the same assurance to Germany that Turkey would not attack unless Germany changed the situation.³⁷ Meanwhile, Germany renewed its pressure after the fall of resistance in Yugoslavia and the British defeat in Greece. This situation was taken seriously when Herr von Papen returned to Ankara on May 13th after a visit to Berlin. The new pressure was related to the uprising in Iraq. The Foreign Office had information that German forces intended to come through Turkey, with or without Turkey's consent, to assist the rebels.

On June 12, however, Herr von Papen once again offered Turkey an agreement stating that both countries would respect each other's integrity and territorial inviolability and maintain good relations in all matters concerning their mutual interests to bring about an understanding other than war.³⁸ Although

³⁷ FO 371/30110. Turco-German Commercial Agreement. Code 44 file 622. (London. The National Archives. 12 march 1941).

³⁸ FO 371/169550. Visit to Turkey of Herr von Papen. wartime German Ambassador. (London. The National Archives. 4 march 1941).

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Germany accepted these terms and requested Turkey to immediately sign the agreement, Turkey, being a neutral country, could not refuse this agreement as it would raise suspicions from the Axis. Germany also indicated that they had no intention to attack Turkish territories, and with the German occupation, the situation in the Middle East was improving.³⁹ Regardless of the conditions of the agreement, it would have a profoundly negative impact, not only on the Allied forces in the Middle East but also on Great Britain and the United States.

The War Cabinet resolved that since they could not prevent the conclusion of the Turkish-German agreement, they would not exert further pressure regarding it. The fundamental fact was that Turkey remained neutral and did not actually join Germany. The Foreign Office stressed that British newspapers should not hold Turkey accountable and that the Allies should continue delivering the promised supplies under the Anglo-Turkish agreement. Should the Allies cut off these supplies, even though Turkey had given assurances that they did not compromise their agreement with the Allies, Turks might question whether the Allies mistrusted them or whether the military position of the Allies themselves was so weak that they couldn't provide Turkey with supplies.⁴⁰ Therefore, the War Cabinet agreed to continue the supply

³⁹ FO 371/30110. Turco-German Commercial Agreement. Code 44 file 622. (London. The National Archives. 12 march 1941).

⁴⁰ Selim Deringil. *Turkish Foreign Policy During the Second World War*. (United Kingdom Cambridge University Press. 2004). 65.

shipments, despite the situation having been altered somewhat by the Turkish-German agreement.

C. Improving Soviet Union-Turkey Relations

The British considered good relations between the Soviet Union and Turkey a key element in their strategy to safeguard their interests and maintain stability in the Balkans and the Mediterranean during World War II. However, relations between the Soviets and Turkey during this period were somewhat strained, particularly due to Turkey's concerns over Soviet threats after the war. Nevertheless, on July 1, 1940, the British received a report from their ambassador in Moscow, Sir Stafford Cripps, noting that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin had expressed his desire to improve relations with Turkey.⁴¹ This statement presented an opportunity for the British, as Stalin emphasized that the Soviet Union had no intention of expanding its influence in the Balkans and was concerned about any Turkish actions that might hinder their plans. Stalin also requested British mediation in this effort, a request that provided the British government with a strategic opportunity to ensure regional stability.⁴²

⁴¹ FO 954/24B/304. Soviet Union: From Sir S. Cripps. Attitude of Stalin towards Britain and Germany. Russian problems. (London. The National Archives 1 July 1940).

⁴² Frank G. Weber. *The Evasive Neutral: Germany, Britain and the Quest for a Turkish Alliance in the Second World War*. University of Missouri Press. Columbia and London 1979. 58.

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Despite this, the British remained cautious about the sincerity of the Soviet proposal, particularly since the Soviets appeared interested in changes to the Montreux Convention. Stalin sought to modify control regulations over the Dardanelles Strait, raising questions about whether the Soviets were actually aiming for exclusive strategic control over the area. The Montreux Convention (1936), which granted Turkey full control over the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits, was a key element of the stability guaranteed by the British in the region.⁴³ Any changes to this convention could provide Germany with direct access to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, thereby threatening British defense interests. The British thus viewed efforts to improve Soviet-Turkish relations as an effective means of alleviating Soviet concerns over Turkey's position in the region.⁴⁴

Sir H. Knatchbull Hugessen, the British ambassador to Turkey, was instructed on June 22, 1941, to inform the Turkish government that their willingness to cooperate with the Soviets would provide mutual benefits in maintaining stability in the

⁴³ FO 954/28B/219. Turkey: Foreign Office telegram to Cairo. No 166 (For Sir A. Cadogan). Soviet Government and possible revision of Montreux Convention. Volume 28. folio(s) 219. Numbered Tur/43/12 on the original. (London. The National Archives 27 January 1943).

⁴⁴ CAB 79/6/28. Telegram From Sir H Knatchbull-Hugessen. Turkey. 21.8.40. Turco Soviet Relations. COS(40)649. (London. The National Archives 23 Sept 1940).

Balkans.⁴⁵ Turkey's response indicated that, although they shared a common interest in preventing German and Italian advances, they remained skeptical of Soviet intentions. This uncertainty posed a significant challenge for the British in establishing a stable alliance between the two countries. The British also insisted that the entire issue of changes to the status of the Straits be thoroughly discussed before any agreement was reached. Thus, on July 11, 1941, Hugessen was directed to obtain feedback from the Turkish government regarding British proposals for balancing Soviet demands without completely relinquishing control over the Dardanelles. The British emphasized that they did not intend to strip Turkey of its rights under the Montreux Convention, but they needed to ensure strategic stability in the region.⁴⁶

Sir S. Cripps, the British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, stressed to the British government that Soviet-Turkish cooperation was a crucial barrier against German incursions into the Black Sea. The British recognized that changes in the status of the Straits would increase Soviet power in the region, but they were concerned that if they offered too many concessions, the Soviets might exploit the situation to gain full control of the strategic passage.⁴⁷ This created anxiety for the British, who

⁴⁵ WO 201/1256. British Liaison Staff No. 21: Russian And Turkish Relations. (London. The National Archives 1 March- 31 May 1941).

⁴⁶ FO 371/30130. Montreux Straits Convention. Code 44 file 2095 (papers 7681-end). (London. The National Archives 1941).

⁴⁷ FO 371/24849/93. Sir S. Cripps - Ambassador To Moscow. Code 38 File 93. (London. The National Archives 30 October 1940).

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needed to be cautious in every diplomatic step to maintain stability in the Mediterranean and the Balkans without opening the way for Soviet dominance. The Turkish government, on the other hand, maintained its commitment to Britain but remained vigilant against offers that might come from Germany. On September 16, 1941, Turkish Foreign Minister Mehmet Saracoglu began considering allowing the Turkish Ambassador to return to Moscow to discuss a Balkan alliance proposal that could alleviate concerns over German influence. This marked a crucial turning point in British efforts to support regional stability through a stronger entente.⁴⁸

A meeting between the Turkish Ambassador and Vyacheslav Molotov on October 17, 1941, saw Molotov welcoming Turkish military preparations in Thrace as a supportive measure to prevent Italian forces from invading Greece. Although this discussion did not immediately lead to changes in the Balkan situation, it indicated that Soviet-Turkish cooperation had the potential to strengthen the southern European defense front. Molotov also reaffirmed the sincerity and friendship of the Soviets towards Turkey, which was a positive sign for regional stability.⁴⁹ On October 30, Sir S. Cripps reported that the Soviets might be

⁴⁸ CAB 79/6/28. Telegram From Sir H Knatchbull-Hugessen. Turkey. 21.8.40. TURCO-SOVIET RELATIONS. COS(40)649. (London. The National Archives 23 Sept 1940).

⁴⁹ FO 371/25012/203. Turco-Soviet relations: frontier situation. Code 44 file 203 (to paper 6976). (London. The National Archives 1940).

considering an offer from Germany regarding the Straits. If true, such an offer would provide the Soviets with bargaining power that could potentially undermine British diplomatic efforts in the Mediterranean. Although the British recognized that Turkey would be persuaded to make certain concessions, they maintained that preserving the status quo was the safest option, as it ensured Turkey's continued control over the Straits without excessive foreign intervention.⁵⁰

Overall, while Soviet-Turkish relations did not reach a full agreement, they remained a key focus of British diplomatic strategy to maintain strategic stability in the Black Sea during World War II. The British recognized that fostering cooperation between the Soviets and Turkey would help curb German influence in the region. Ultimately, the British chose to support Turkey's position in the Dardanelles as a primary measure to prevent German advances into the Mediterranean. This approach also aimed to establish a security zone along the Straits, thereby safeguarding British strategic interests and those of their allies in efforts to maintain control and stability across a broader region, including the Middle East and the Balkans. At this point, it can be seen that relations between Britain and Turkey had entered the second phase, during which Turkey adopted an armed neutrality

⁵⁰ FO 371/24849/93. Sir S. Cripps - Ambassador To Moscow. Code 38 File 93. (London. The National Archives 30 October 1940).

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stance and balanced its relations between Britain and Germany from 1941 to 1943.

D. Controlling Chromium Supplies

Turkey's geographical position was not only significant in terms of strategic routes and military location, but also contributed to a form of "economic geography" that influenced British foreign policy. One key aspect was its possession of chromium (chrome) resources. During World War II, the significance of chromium supplies in Turkey escalated notably. Chromium is a crucial mineral in steel production and has various military applications, including weapon manufacturing, ammunition, and armor. As both the Allied and Axis powers were competing for access to chromium supplies, this mineral became pivotal in the production of weapons and armaments. Turkey possessed abundant chromite sources, particularly in the southern part of the country. For the Allies, ensuring a stable supply of chromium was crucial to maintain their weapons production. Simultaneously, Axis forces, primarily Germany, also sought chromium supplies for their military industries. Therefore, both the Allied and Axis powers made efforts, offering agreements and negotiations to Turkey, in their pursuit to gain full control over chromium supplies. Securing complete control over these chromium resources would grant a strategic advantage to any nation during the war.

On September 6, 1941, a German trade delegation arrived in Ankara and began pressuring Turkey to readjust its trade to meet Germany's needs, primarily focusing on chromium supply.⁵¹ For the British, controlling or at least restricting German access to Turkey's chrome resources was a key strategy in weakening the enemy's military industrial capabilities. Chrome is crucial for all stainless steel and chrome-nickel alloy, while chrome-molybdenum is essential for shields, gun barrel plating, and various types of ammunition. In the early 1940s, Great Britain and France secured an agreement guaranteeing Turkey's entire chrome output for two years, with an option to purchase for a third year. The British government argued that France's fall did not nullify this pact, and the agreement between Turkey and Great Britain remained in force. Until 1941, the Turkish government accepted and adhered to this agreement, assuring that they would not allow Germany to purchase any of their chrome.⁵²

However, under German pressure, Turkey began to stipulate that the renewal of the agreement after January 1942 depended on notification by France and also by the British government. The British government contested this view and affirmed that they had

⁵¹ HW 1/93, Japanese chargé, London: Turkey has given way to German threats and undertaken to supply Germany with chrome, (London. The National Archives, 1941).

⁵² FO 93/110/116. Supplementary to Agreement regarding Chrome of 8 January. 1940. 11 Oct 1940 - 15 Oct 1940. (London. The National Archives. 1940).

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continued to fulfill their commitment to supplying Turkey.⁵³ Turkey's action of selling chrome to Germany was likened to providing a means to kill Allied forces. Following over a month of negotiations with Germany, the Turkish government resisted supplying Germany with chrome until January 1943, after the expiration of the original Anglo-French agreement. However, under British pressure, Turkey only promised a certain quantity, less than what Germany requested, before and after January 1943. In return, the Turkish government asked for deliveries of items that Germany would find difficult or even impossible to supply to Turkey. Hence, the Foreign Office argued that, under those circumstances, the Turkish government provided only a minimal amount of chrome to Germany, and after the political agreement with Germany the previous June, Britain believed it should continue supporting Turkey to keep it leaning towards the British side.⁵⁴ The lack of Turkish chrome supplies to Germany has significantly hampered German war efforts, providing an advantage to the Allied forces.

This action demonstrates that Turkey's natural geographical factors, in the form of mineral resources, influenced Britain's decision to prioritise relations with Turkey in its foreign policy.

⁵³ FO 93/110/116. Supplementary to Agreement regarding Chrome of 8 January. 1940. 11 Oct 1940 - 15 Oct 1940. (London. The National Archives. 1940).

⁵⁴ FO 371/30082, Anglo-Turkish Chrome Agreement - shipments to the United States. Code 44 file 179 (to paper 6664), (London, The National Archives, 1941).

When Germany attempted to persuade Turkey to sell chrome to them, Britain not only opposed the move but also asserted that any sale of chrome to Germany would be regarded as a direct threat to the security of Allied forces. It is therefore evident that Turkey's geographical position, in terms of resource location and economic potential, served as a key driver of British diplomatic policy aimed at curbing enemy influence and strengthening the alliance. This illustrates how geographical elements in the form of mineral resources also played a crucial role in shaping geopolitical decisions. This situation indirectly reflected that the relationship between Britain and Turkey had entered the final phase, in which Turkey showed a greater inclination towards siding with Britain from 1943 to 1945.

V. Conclusion

The conclusion drawn from the events of World War II indicates British involvement in several international alliances, with a primary focus of this study being Turkey. British engagement with Turkey began primarily during World War II when Britain offered Turkey a mutual assistance agreement with Britain and France on October 19, 1939. Turkey entered into this agreement primarily out of fear of attacks from Germany and Italy, assuming there would be no difficulty with the Soviet Union due to their strong opposition to Nazism and Fascism. Although initially appearing disinterested in any alliances and preferring to remain neutral, Britain viewed Turkey as a crucial nation to

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become an ally. This was because Britain needed Turkey's support to gain full control of the Mediterranean and the Middle Sea. Control over these areas was vital for trade routes and military strategy in the war against the Axis powers involving nations in that region.

Furthermore, the importance of controlling Turkish territory also offered crucial access for Britain to attack Germany and Italy from the South, thereby increasing pressure on the European front. The United Kingdom attempted to keep Turkey within the allied camp to prevent the possibility of Turkey siding with the Axis powers. This involved various political negotiations and military assistance offered by Great Britain to Turkey. Establishing economic ties between Britain and Turkey during the war was also a highly significant aspect. Britain provided economic and logistical aid to Turkey, while Turkey maintained beneficial economic relations with Britain to ensure the sustainability of its economy. Although Turkey maintained its neutral stance for much of the war, it eventually decided to align with the Allies under pressure and to secure their safety and territorial integrity post-war. Consequently, the relationship between Britain and Turkey during World War II was highly significant for both parties. In terms of military strategy, geopolitics, economics, and diplomacy, the cooperation between these two nations had significant implications for the course of the war and regional political dynamics thereafter.

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The Trump 2.0 Administration's Rare Earth Policy Trajectory under the US-China Strategic Competition

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Abstract

This paper examines the trajectory of the Trump2.0 administration's rare earth policy within the broader US-China strategic competition. It analyzes Trump's escalation of economic and technological decoupling, military posturing, and ideological confrontation, particularly through tariffs and export controls. China, dominating 70% of rare earth production and nearly 90% of processing, has used rare earths as a geopolitical tool, notably restricting exports to pressure the US and Japan. In response, the US is pursuing domestic supply chain revitalization, supported by the Department of Defense and legislation like the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act. Externally, the US has invested in Australia, Canada, and Africa, while forming alliances such as the Minerals Security Partnership with the EU, Japan, and Australia. The US International Development Finance Corporation finances mining projects in Africa and South America. This intensifying competition is reshaping global geopolitics, enhancing the strategic importance of rare

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earth-producing nations. Yet, challenges remain, including environmental concerns, high costs, and entrenched Chinese dominance. Without coordinated international efforts, supply vulnerabilities and geopolitical risks will persist.

Keywords: Trump 2.0, US-China Competition, Trade War, China's Rare Earth Foreign Policy, US Response for Chinese Rare Earth Policy

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I. Introduction

In 2018, the Trump government (2017–2021) initiated a trade war against China, implementing import duties, investment restrictions, and sanctions aimed at Chinese companies. These measures, which the Biden administration (2021–2025) chose to maintain, primarily targeted China's vibrant high-tech industry. US-China relations under the second term of Donald Trump's presidency, with a specific focus on the "China Containment Strategy." During his first term, Trump's administration reoriented US foreign policy toward a confrontational stance against China, characterized by economic decoupling, technological restrictions, military posturing in the Indo-Pacific, and an ideological contest between democratic and authoritarian governance models. This paper analyses the continuity and potential evolution of these policies in light of shifting geopolitical realities, domestic political priorities, and emergent global challenges.

While exploring US' implications for the Indo-Pacific region and the broader global order. Key findings indicate that while foundational aspects of Trump's first-term policies, such as tariffs, supply chain diversification, and Indo-Pacific defense initiatives, are likely to persist, strategic recalibrations may emerge. These include targeted decoupling in critical industries, redefined alliance management to bolster multilateral coalitions, expanded

soft power campaigns to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative, and a more assertive approach toward Taiwan.¹

Starting in February 2025, the Trump administration launched a new wave of tariffs on copper, steel, aluminum, and anti-dumping measures while removing duty-free thresholds on low-priced imports, extending these to electronics and telecom-related products. Additionally, the US Department of Commerce has initiated national security investigations into Chinese drones and critical materials used in chips and solar panels. More high-tech components may soon be added to the restricted list. Although Trump's policy aims to curb China's high-tech capabilities, the Financial Times pointed out that it may backfire, accelerating China's self-reliance and investment in quantum technologies, AI, semiconductors, and aerospace industries, potentially leading to long-term structural risks.²

China produces around 60-90% of the world's rare earths, a group of 17 elements used across the defense, electric vehicle, energy and electronics industries. The United States has only one rare earths mine and most of its supply comes from China.

¹ Samim Aktar. "Trump 2.0 and the China Containment Strategy: Continuity or Change?," Globalpanorama, March 4, (2025).
<https://www.globalpanorama.org/en/2025/03/trump-2-0-and-the-china-containment-strategy-continuity-or-change-samim-aktar/>.

² Keyu Jin. "If Trump Is Trying to Suppress China, He's Going about It All Wrong," Financial Times. April 10, (2025).
https://www.ft.com/content/258326fb-39c1-4ae5-a79c-270cdbef4a23?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

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Beijing announced the controls late on Friday as part of a broader package of tariffs and company restrictions in retaliation for Trump's decision to hike tariffs against most Chinese products to 54%. The export curbs include not only mined minerals but permanent magnets and other finished products that will be difficult to replace, analysts said. The move, which affects exports to all countries, not just the US, is the latest demonstration of China's ability to weaponize its dominance over the mining and processing of the critical minerals.³

In the era of globalization, the US and China have developed a complementary division of labor: China supplies raw materials, while the US processes them into high-tech products.⁴ During Trump's first term, he launched the US–China trade war and identified China as the only rival capable of shaping the international order.⁵ In a hypothetical second term, Trump may escalate tactics to “choke” China—such as pressuring China into a rare-earths export embargo—thereby strengthening the US

³ Lewis Jackson. Amy Lv, Eric Onstad and Ernest Scheyder. “China Hits Back at US Tariffs with Export Controls on Key Rare Earths,” Reuters, April 5, (2025).

https://www.reuters.com/world/china-hits-back-us-tariffs-with-rare-earth-export-controls-2025-04-04/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁴ Keith Bradsher. “How Rare Earths Factor in the US-China Trade War,” *The New York Times*, November 22, (2019).

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/business/china-rare-earth-trade-war.html>.

⁵ The White House. National Security Strategy of the United States of America. Washington, DC: The White House, December, (2017).

<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

bargaining position in tariff negotiations.⁶ On one hand, China's rare-earth ban could force US concessions, exemplified by Trump personally calling Xi Jinping to ease tensions.⁷ On the other hand, it forces the US to reassess supply chain security, especially concerning reliable access to rare-earth elements.⁸

II. China's Monopoly on Rare Earth Production

A. Mining Originated from the Reform and Opening-Up Period, Giving China an Early Start

Rare earth mining in China has long been associated with severe environmental pollution. During the Reform and Opening-Up era, China prioritized rapid industrial growth and foreign exchange earnings, even at the expense of environmental sustainability. This led to the aggressive extraction of rare earth elements, essential for high-tech products such as smartphones,

⁶ Lewis Jackson, Amy Lv, Eric Onstad and Ernest Scheyder. "China Hits Back at US Tariffs with Export Controls on Key Rare Earths," https://www.reuters.com/world/china-hits-back-us-tariffs-with-rare-earth-export-controls-2025-04-04/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁷ Time Magazine. "Trump and Xi Hold First Call in Months, Setting Stage for More Trade Talks," *Time*, June 5, (2025). <https://time.com/7291416/trump-and-xi-have-first-call-in-months/>

⁸ Nandita Bose and David Lawder. "US Says Deal With Beijing Will Expedite Rare Earth Exports from China," Reuters, June 27, (2025). <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/trump-says-deal-related-trade-was-signed-with-china-wednesday-2025-06-26/>; Christian Shepherd & Lyric Li. "Even After Trump-Xi Call, China's Rare-Earth Controls Aren't Going Away," The Washington Post, June 6, (2025). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/06/06/china-rare-earths-trump-xi-call/>.

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electric vehicles, and military equipment.⁹ The industry's environmental toll includes toxic waste, soil degradation, and water contamination, particularly in regions like Inner Mongolia and Jiangxi province. According to the Chinese Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, illegal mining and lax environmental standards have exacerbated these issues.¹⁰ Although China remains the dominant global supplier, accounting for about 60-90% of global production, the government has since imposed stricter regulations to mitigate ecological damage. However, the legacy of pollution persists, and the global reliance on China's rare earths continues to raise concerns about environmental and supply chain vulnerabilities.¹¹

China leads the world in rare earth mining patents, holding over 25,000 patents related to extraction technologies, while the United States holds approximately 9,810.¹² This significant gap

⁹ Jaya Nayar. "Not So 'Green' Technology: The Complicated Legacy of Rare Earth Mining," *Harvard International Review*, August 12, (2021). <https://hir.harvard.edu/not-so-green-technology-the-complicated-legacy-of-rare-earth-mining/>.

¹⁰ Kristin Vala Rydze. "China's Rare-Earth Mining Boom Leaves Toxic Legacy in Water and Soil." *Environmental Health News*, June (2025). https://www.ehn.org/chinas-rare-earth-mining-boom-leaves-toxic-legacy-in-water-and-soil?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

¹¹ Wei Chen, Peng Wang , Fanran Meng , Alexandra Pehlken , Qiao-Chu Wang ,and Wei-Qiang Chen. "Reshaping Heavy Rare Earth Supply Chains Amidst China's Stringent Environmental Regulations," *Fundam Res*, 5 no.2, January 26, (2024): 505–513.

¹² Gregory Wischer & Morgan Bazilian. "Circumventing the Chokepoint: Can the US Produce More Rare Earths?," *Newsecuritybeat*, October 30, (2023).

reflects China's longstanding focus on controlling the rare earth value chain, from mining to refining. By investing heavily in research and development, China has not only optimized extraction efficiency but also advanced environmentally friendlier techniques, though challenges remain. In contrast, the US lags in both patent holdings and domestic production capacity, contributing to its dependency on Chinese rare earth supplies. This technological advantage allows China to maintain a strategic edge in global supply chains, especially in critical industries such as electronics, renewable energy, and defense systems.¹³ As geopolitical competition intensifies, particularly in the tech and defense sectors, the US is seeking to revitalize its rare earth industry through innovation and alliances, but catching up with China's patent leadership remains a major hurdle.¹⁴

B. China Becomes the Monopoly of the Global Supply Chain

China has become the dominant force in global supply chains, particularly in critical sectors such as rare earth minerals, electronics manufacturing, and solar energy components. This

https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2023/10/circumventing-chokepoint-produce-rare-earths/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

¹³ US Geological Survey, "Mineral Commodity Summaries 2024: Rare Earths," *Geological Survey*, 144, (2024). <https://doi.org/10.3133/mcs2024>.

¹⁴ Jian Zhou and Yu Wang, "China's Rare Earth Patent Dominance: Implications for Global Supply Chains," *Journal of Industrial Policy*, 12, no.1,(2023): 45–67.

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monopoly is the result of decades of strategic industrial policy, infrastructure investment, and the accumulation of patents. For instance, China holds over 25,000 patents related to rare earth extraction, while the US possesses merely around 10,000.¹⁵ Such technological and production advantages allow China to exert significant leverage over industries worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic and US–China tensions have exposed the vulnerabilities of this concentrated supply chain, prompting countries like the United States, Japan, and the EU to seek diversification and supply chain resilience.¹⁶ Yet, replacing China's centrality remains a formidable challenge due to its entrenched manufacturing ecosystem and cost advantages.

III. China Gradually Uses Rare Earths as a Bargaining Chip in Negotiations

A. China Tried to Use Rare Earth Exports Putting Pressure on Japan

China has strategically used rare earth exports as a means to pressure Japan, particularly evident during the 2010 diplomatic dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Following Japan's detention of a Chinese fishing boat captain near the contested

¹⁵ David Sandalow. *Guide to Chinese Climate Policy 2019*. New York: Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs, (2019).

¹⁶ The White House. *Building Resilient Supply Chains, Revitalizing American Manufacturing, and Fostering Broad-Based Growth, 100-Day Reviews under Executive Order 14017*. Washington, DC: The White House, (2021): 3.

islands, China unofficially restricted rare earth exports to Japan, disrupting its high-tech manufacturing sector, which heavily relies on these critical materials for products like semiconductors, batteries, and precision equipment.¹⁷ This move exposed Japan's vulnerability due to its dependency on Chinese rare earths, which accounted for over 90% of its supply at the time.

The incident prompted Japan to diversify its rare earth sources by investing in mining projects in Australia, Vietnam, and other countries, as well as developing recycling technologies. It also heightened global awareness of China's leverage over rare earth markets, spurring similar diversification efforts by the US and EU.¹⁸

China's rare earth strategy demonstrates how control over critical resources can translate into geopolitical influence. However, it also risks encouraging international efforts to bypass Chinese dominance, potentially reducing China's long-term market control.¹⁹

¹⁷ Jost Wübbecke. "Rare Earth Elements in China: Policies and Narratives of Reinventing an Industry," *Resources Policy*, 38, no. 3 (2013): 384–394.

¹⁸ Ryan David Kiggins. *The Political Economy of Rare Earth Elements: Rising Powers and Technological Change*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, (2015): 128–131.

¹⁹ Marc Humphries. *Rare Earth Elements: The Global Supply Chain*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, (2013): 12–14.

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B. Currently, China Uses Rare Earth Exports to Pressure the US

Since April 2025, China has implemented new export controls on medium- and heavy-rare-earth elements such as dysprosium, terbium, and samarium—minerals essential for US high-tech and defense industries—requiring exporters to obtain special licenses.²⁰ These restrictions were introduced in response to US tariffs, positioning rare earths as geopolitical bargaining chips.²¹

Within weeks of the export control order, shipments of rare-earth magnets—vital to electric vehicles, jet fighters, and wind turbines—plummeted by around 74 percent year-over-year in May, causing significant disruptions in US supply chains.²² The US automotive and defense industries reported factory

²⁰ Gracelin Baskaran & Meredith Schwartz, “The Consequences of China’s New Rare Earths Export Restrictions,” CSIS, April 14, (2025). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/consequences-chinas-new-rare-earths-export-restrictions>.

²¹ Joseph Sopcisak. “China Imposes Export Controls on Medium and Heavy Rare Earth Materials,” *Holland & Knight Alert*, April (2025). <https://www.hklaw.com/en/insights/publications/2025/04/china-imposes-export-controls-on-medium-and-heavy-rare-earth-materials>.

²² Amy Lv and Ryan Woo. “China’s Rare Earth Magnet Shipments Halve in May due to Export Curbs,” *Reuters*, June 20, (2025). <https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/chinas-rare-earth-magnet-shipments-halve-may-due-export-curbs-2025-06-20/>.

slowdowns and shortages, underscoring their vulnerability to reliance on Chinese rare earths.²³

The strategic move highlights China's geopolitical influence. By implementing a flexible "license wall" instead of an outright ban, Beijing retains the ability to selectively restrict exports without violating World Trade Organization rules.²⁴ This enables China to apply pressure precisely while maintaining plausible deniability.

In response, the US government and private sector have accelerated efforts to build domestic rare earth capacity. Initiatives include Pentagon-backed expansion of MP Materials' mine-to-magnet chain, Alaska and Wyoming mining projects, and partnerships like Apple's investment in recycling facilities.²⁵

²³ Christina Amann. "Nick Carey, And Kalea Hall, "Auto Companies 'in Full Panic' Over Rare-Earths Bottleneck," *Reuters*, June 9, (2025). <https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/auto-companies-in-full-panic-over-rare-earths-bottleneck-2025-06-09/>.

²⁴ Tye Graham and Peter W. Singer. "How China's New Rare-Earth Export Controls Target the Pentagon—and the World." *Ahead of the Herd*, July (2025). <https://aheadoftheherd.com/how-chinas-new-rare-earth-export-controls-target-the-pentagon-and-the-world/>.

²⁵ Financial Times. "Pentagon Strikes Investment Deal with US Critical Minerals Producer," *Financial Times*, July 9, (2025). <https://www.ft.com/content/6693da6f-7cb7-4c74-8c4f-45b1bf533cbe>.

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However, heavy rare earth processing remains nearly exclusive to China, with the US still far from self-sufficiency.²⁶

In short, China's use of rare earth export controls to pressure the US is a powerful example of resource-based economic statecraft. It underscores the strategic importance of securing critical mineral supply chains before they become tools in global diplomacy.

IV. US Policy Response to China's Pressure on Rare Earths

A. Attempting to Build an Internal Rare Earth Supply Chain

In response to China's increasing use of rare earth export controls as geopolitical leverage, the United States has initiated a multi-pronged domestic policy approach to reduce its dependence on Chinese rare earths and strengthen critical mineral supply chains. These efforts have intensified following China's 2025 export restrictions on heavy rare earths such as dysprosium and

²⁶ Jon Emont. "America's Biggest Rare-Earth Producer Makes a Play to End China's Dominance," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 15, (2025).
<https://www.wsj.com/business/us-rare-earth-producer-texas-58796240>.

terbium, which are essential for US defense systems, electric vehicles, and renewable energy technologies.²⁷

One of the most significant US policy moves is the expansion of domestic mining and processing capabilities. The Department of Defense (DoD) has provided financial support to companies like MP Materials to reestablish a fully integrated mine-to-magnet supply chain within the United States.²⁸ MP Materials operates the Mountain Pass mine in California, the only operational rare earth mine in the US, and is investing in on-site processing facilities to eliminate the need for Chinese intermediaries.

Furthermore, the US government passed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law in 2021.²⁹ and the Inflation Reduction Act in

²⁷ Sean Craig. "Pentagon Takes \$400 Million Stake in Rare-Earth Miner Outside Vegas," *The Washington Post*, July 10, (2025).

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/07/10/pentagon-rare-earths/>.

²⁸ Katha Kalia, Eric Onstad and Ernest Scheyder. "MP Materials Seals Mega Rare-Earths Deal With US To Break China's Grip," Reuters, July 11, (2025). <https://www.reuters.com/business/mp-materials-partners-with-department-defense-boost-us-rare-earth-magnet-supply-2025-07-10/>.

²⁹ US Department of Energy, Office of Fossil Energy and Carbon Management. "Funding Notice: Bipartisan Infrastructure Law: Advanced Processing of Critical Minerals and Materials for Industrial and Manufacturing Applications." US Department of Energy, Office of Fossil Energy and Carbon Management, July 16, (2024).

<https://www.energy.gov/fecm/funding-notice-bipartisan-infrastructure-law-advanced-processing-critical-minerals-and-materials-for-industrial-and-manufacturing-applications>.

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2022,³⁰ which allocate billions of dollars to support the development of domestic critical mineral supply chains, including rare earths.³¹ These laws incentivize mining, recycling, and the development of alternative materials to mitigate risks associated with supply disruptions.

Recycling of rare earths has also gained prominence. Companies like Apple have invested in closed-loop recycling systems, recovering rare earth materials from used devices to reduce reliance on primary mining (Axios, 2025).³² The Department of Energy (DOE) is similarly funding research into recycling technologies and alternative materials that can replace rare earths in key applications.

Moreover, the US has increased its focus on public-private partnerships to advance research and development. The DOE's Critical Materials Institute leads research on improving extraction processes, diversifying supply sources, and creating rare earth

³⁰ US Congress. Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (P.L. 117-169), US Congress, August 16, (2022).

<https://www.congress.gov/117/plaws/publ169/PLAW-117publ169.pdf>.

³¹ Environmental and Energy Study Institute. "Issue Brief: Critical Minerals and the US Clean Energy Transition," Environmental and Energy Study Institute, July (2025).

³² Ernest Scheyder. "Apple in \$500 million rare earth magnet deal with MP to expand US supply chain," *Reuters*, July 16, (2025).

<https://www.reuters.com/business/apple-invest-500-million-rare-earths-mine-operator-mp-materials-fox-business-2025-07-15/>.

substitutes.³³ Simultaneously, new environmental regulations are being reviewed to streamline permits for rare earth mining, while balancing environmental protection and local community concerns.

Collectively, these domestic strategies demonstrate the US commitment to mitigating China's rare earth leverage by reshoring supply chains, fostering innovation, and securing sustainable access to critical materials. Nevertheless, experts acknowledge that fully decoupling from Chinese rare earths will take years, if not decades, due to China's entrenched processing capabilities and cost advantages.

In response to China's strategic use of rare earth exports as a form of economic coercion, the United States is actively pursuing the development of an internal rare earth supply chain. This policy shift aims to reduce America's dependence on Chinese rare earth materials, which are critical for manufacturing advanced technologies, including defense systems, electric vehicles, and renewable energy infrastructure.³⁴

³³ US Department of Energy. "Critical Materials and Materials Program." *US Department of Energy*, June 25, (2025).

<https://www.energy.gov/cmm/critical-minerals-and-materials-program>.

³⁴ Eric Onstad. "US Rare Earth Pricing System Is Poised to Challenge China's Dominance," Reuters, July 15, (2025).

https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/us-rare-earth-pricing-system-is-poised-challenge-chinas-dominance-2025-07-14/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

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The cornerstone of the US response is the revitalization of domestic mining and processing. MP Materials, which operates the only active rare earth mine in Mountain Pass, California, is expanding its operations to include refining and magnet production within the United States. This initiative is supported by the Department of Defense (DoD) through grants designed to establish a complete mine-to-magnet supply chain domestically.³⁵ The DoD's involvement reflects national security concerns, given the essential role of rare earths in advanced weapons systems such as F-35 fighter jets and precision-guided munitions.

Additionally, the US government has implemented legislative measures to bolster critical mineral capabilities. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law in 2021 and the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022 have allocated substantial funding to promote domestic mining, material processing, and recycling initiatives.³⁶ These policies provide financial incentives and research support to companies engaging in rare earth extraction and processing on US soil.

³⁵ Katha Kalia, Eric Onstad and Ernest Scheyder. "MP Materials Partners With Department of Defense to Boost US Rare-Earth Magnet Supply," Reuters, July 11, (2025).
<https://www.reuters.com/business/mp-materials-partners-with-department-defense-boost-us-rare-earth-magnet-supply-2025-07-10/>.

³⁶ Energy.gov. "Issue Brief: Critical Minerals and the US Clean Energy Transition," *Energy.gov*, July (2025).
<https://www.eesi.org/papers/view/issue-brief-critical-minerals-and-the-u-s-clean-energy-transition>.

Recycling has emerged as a complementary strategy. Companies like Apple are investing in recycling rare earth materials from electronic waste, contributing to a circular economy approach that decreases reliance on mined resources.³⁷ Furthermore, the Department of Energy's Critical Materials Institute is conducting research to develop more efficient recycling technologies and potential alternatives to rare earths.³⁸

Public-private partnerships are essential to this effort. Collaboration between government agencies, private companies, and academic institutions is facilitating innovation in extraction, processing, and substitution technologies. Concurrently, regulatory reforms are under consideration to expedite mining permits while ensuring environmental protections and community engagement.

Despite these efforts, experts warn that rebuilding a fully self-sufficient rare earth supply chain will take years. China's dominance in rare earth refining and magnet production, along

³⁷ Emanuela Hawker. "Apple, MP Materials to Build Rare Earths Recycling Facility Under New \$500 Million Supply Deal," *ESGtoday*, July 17, (2025). <https://www.esgtoday.com/apple-mp-materials-to-build-rare-earths-recycling-facility-under-new-500-million-supply-deal/>.

³⁸ Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Analyzing the Escalating US-China Trade Conflict and Rare Earth Export Restrictions." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 1, (2025). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/analyzing-escalating-us-china-trade-conflict-rare-earth-export-restrictions>.

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with its cost advantages, remains a formidable obstacle.³⁹ Nevertheless, the US policy trajectory is clear: constructing a secure, diversified, and resilient rare earth supply chain is now a strategic imperative to safeguard economic and national security interests.⁴⁰

B. Expanding Overseas Rare Earth Operations

In response to China's dominance in rare earth elements (REEs), the United States is not only reshoring production but also pursuing an aggressive external strategy to diversify global supply chains. Recognizing that domestic capacity alone is insufficient to meet industrial and security needs, Washington is expanding rare earth mining and investment in allied countries such as Australia, Canada, and several African nations.⁴¹

Australia has emerged as a key partner in this strategy. The US Department of Defense (DoD) has provided funding support to Lynas Rare Earths, the world's largest rare earth producer

³⁹ Karen Kwok and George Hay. "China's Tightest Rare-Earths Headlock Is Financial," *Reuters*, July 17, (2025).
<https://www.reuters.com/commentary/breakingviews/chinas-tightest-rare-earth-s-headlock-is-financial-2025-07-17/>.

⁴⁰ Financial Times. "The Small Mining Company That Won Backing from the Pentagon—and Apple," *Financial Times*, July 15, (2025).
<https://www.ft.com/content/79b1693a-0788-4dc6-b431-027695534c62>

⁴¹ The Africa Report. "US Looks to Africa to Diversify Supply Chain for Critical Minerals," *The Africa Report*, September 23, (2022).
<https://www.theafricareport.com/243847/us-looks-to-africa-to-diversify-supply-chain-for-critical-minerals/>.

outside China, to build a processing facility in Texas and enhance production capabilities in Western Australia.⁴² This bilateral cooperation not only boosts supply but also integrates allied supply chains to reduce vulnerabilities.

Canada is another focus of US investment. The US and Canadian governments signed a Joint Action Plan on Critical Minerals Collaboration, which facilitates cross-border investments in mining projects, processing technologies, and environmental sustainability standards.⁴³ Canada's vast mineral resources and stable political environment make it an attractive partner for securing reliable rare earth supplies.

Beyond traditional allies, the US is exploring investment opportunities in Africa, particularly in countries like Malawi, Tanzania, and Madagascar, which possess untapped rare earth reserves. The US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) has been tasked with financing mining projects in these

⁴² Matt Blois, "US Invests in Rare Earth Firm MP Materials," Chemical & Engineering News, July 11, (2025).
<https://cen.acs.org/business/investment/US-invests-in-rare-earth-firm-MP-Materials/103/web/2025/07>.

⁴³ Riya Sharma & Ernest Scheyder, "Lynas Rare Earths Signs Updated Contract with US Govt for Texas Facility, Shares Rise," *Reuters*, August 1, (2023).
<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/australian-rare-earth-stocks-soar-mp-materials-multi-billion-us-deal-2025-07-11/>.

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regions, aiming to foster sustainable development while counterbalancing China's influence on the continent.⁴⁴

Additionally, Washington is collaborating with the European Union, Japan, and South Korea to establish a “Critical Minerals Club,” an alliance designed to coordinate investments, establish shared standards, and enhance transparency in the rare earth supply chain.⁴⁵ This multilateral approach is intended to create a more balanced global market that is less susceptible to Chinese export restrictions.

These external investments are complemented by technological partnerships aimed at improving extraction methods, refining techniques, and environmental safeguards. Public-private initiatives, often involving universities and research institutes, play a crucial role in advancing sustainable mining practices abroad.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Political instability in resource-rich regions, environmental concerns, and the capital-intensive nature of mining projects can slow progress. However, by building diversified supply chains with reliable

⁴⁴ US International Development Finance Corporation. “Supporting Development of a Rare Earth Processing Facility in Angola,” *DFC*, (2025). <https://www.dfc.gov/investment-story/supporting-development-rare-earth-processing-facility-angola>.

⁴⁵ Financial Times. “Western Nations Join Forces to Break China’s Grip on Critical Minerals,” *Financial Times*, September 23, (2024). <https://www.ft.com/content/2984ae03-df15-420b-89cc-9ad8337014a9>.

partners, the US aims to mitigate strategic risks and ensure a stable supply of rare earths critical to its economic and national security.⁴⁶

To reduce dependence on China for rare earth elements (REEs), the United States has increasingly focused on overseas investments in mining and processing projects. These investments are part of a broader strategy to secure diversified and reliable sources of critical minerals essential for defense technologies, electric vehicles, and renewable energy infrastructure.⁴⁷

One of the most significant US investments abroad is in Australia. The US Department of Defense has partnered with Lynas Rare Earths, providing funding to enhance its production capabilities in Western Australia and to construct a rare earth separation facility in Texas.⁴⁸ This collaboration strengthens the supply chain by linking allied production with US processing.

⁴⁶ Forrest Crellin. "Low diversity in critical mineral markets could hurt industry, IEA says," Reuters, May 21, (2025).
<https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/low-diversity-critical-mineral-markets-could-hurt-industry-iea-says-2025-05-21/>.

⁴⁷ Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Analyzing the Escalating US-China Trade Conflict and Rare Earth Export Restrictions," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, April 15, (2025).
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/analyzing-escalating-us-china-trade-conflict-and-rare-earth-export-restrictions>.

⁴⁸ Matt Blois. "US Invests in Rare Earth Firm MP Materials," *Chemical & Engineering News*, July 11, (2025).
<https://cen.acs.org/business/investment/US-invests-in-rare-earth-firm-MP-Materials/103/web/2025/07>.

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Canada is another important destination for US investment. Under the Joint Action Plan on Critical Minerals Collaboration, both countries are coordinating efforts to develop mining projects and processing capacity, leveraging Canada's vast mineral resources and stable regulatory environment.⁴⁹

In addition to traditional allies, the US is also investing in Africa. The US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) has supported rare earth exploration projects in Malawi and Tanzania, aiming to foster sustainable mining and reduce the global supply chain's vulnerability to Chinese control.⁵⁰

Furthermore, Washington collaborates with the European Union, Japan, and South Korea to establish multilateral frameworks like the "Critical Minerals Club," designed to

⁴⁹ Steve Scherer & Katya Golubkova. "Canada to Accelerate Critical Mineral Mining – Energy Minister," *Reuters*, April 14, (2023). <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/canada-ready-become-critical-minerals-provider-minister-says-2023-04-14/>; Natural Resources Canada. "Canada and US Finalize Joint Action Plan on Critical Minerals Collaboration," *Government of Canada*, January 9, (2020). <https://www.canada.ca/en/natural-resources-canada/news/2020/01/canada-and-us-finalize-joint-action-plan-on-critical-minerals-collaboration.html>.

⁵⁰ Andy Home. "After Ukraine Deal, US Turns Its Critical Minerals Gaze to Africa." *Reuters*, May 6, (2025). <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/after-ukraine-deal-us-turns-its-critical-minerals-gaze-africa-andy-home-2025-05-06/>.

coordinate international investments and ensure transparent, ethical sourcing of rare earths.⁵¹

These overseas investments reflect a strategic imperative to build resilient supply chains, mitigating geopolitical risks while supporting global economic security.

V. Conclusion

Geopolitical competition between major powers is increasingly shaped by the race to secure access to critical minerals, especially rare earth elements (REEs). As the demand for rare earths grows due to their essential role in defense technologies, renewable energy, and advanced electronics, the United States and China have intensified their competition in rare earth-producing countries worldwide.⁵²

China, which currently dominates rare earth processing, has expanded its investments and partnerships across Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. Chinese state-owned enterprises have secured mining rights in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, and Madagascar,

⁵¹ White & Case. "Critical Minerals Supply Chains: The Minerals Security Partnership and Trade." *White & Case*, (2024).
<https://www.whitecase.com/insight-our-thinking/critical-minerals-supply-chain-s-minerals-security-partnership-and-trade>

⁵² International Gem Society. "The Geopolitical Battleground of Rare Earth Minerals," *International Gem Society*, May 12, (2025).
<https://www.gemsociety.org/article/rare-earth-minerals-in-geopolitics/>.

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ensuring a steady supply of strategic resources.⁵³ This global footprint not only consolidates China's control over the rare earth market but also extends its geopolitical influence in resource-rich regions.⁵⁴

In response, the United States has launched initiatives to counter China's mineral dominance. The Minerals Security Partnership (MSP), formed with allies such as the European Union, Japan, and Australia, aims to invest in sustainable mining projects and build transparent, resilient supply chains.⁵⁵ Additionally, the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) is financing mining ventures in Africa and South America to diversify sourcing away from Chinese control.⁵⁶

⁵³ The Annapurna Express. "China-backed militia secures control of new rare earth mines in Myanmar" *The Annapurna Express*, June 12, (2025).

<https://theannapurnaexpress.com/story/55110/>; Reuters. "Why China's ultimatum to Myanmar rebels threatens global supply of heavy rare earths." July 8, 2025.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-risks-global-heavy-rare-earth-supply-stop-myanmar-rebel-victory-2025-07-08/>

⁵⁴ US Department of State. "Minerals Security Partnership," *US Department of State*, January 20, (2025).

<https://2021-2025.state.gov/minerals-security-partnership/>.

⁵⁵ US International Development Finance Corporation. *Strengthening Critical Mineral Supply Chains by Countering China's Dominance*, DFC, (2025).

<https://www.dfc.gov/investment-story/strengthening-critical-mineral-supply-chains-countering-chinas-dominance>.

⁵⁶ Lowy Institute. "China's Rare Earth Advantage Isn't Just About Control." *The Interpreter*, May 26, (2025).

<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-s-rare-earth-advantage-isn-t-just-about-control>.

This competition is reshaping global geopolitics, as rare earth-producing nations gain strategic importance. Their resources have become not just economic assets but also bargaining chips in the broader US-China rivalry. Without coordinated international efforts, this scramble risks creating new dependencies and environmental challenges in vulnerable regions.

Donald Trump is enhancing its policy responses to reduce dependence on Chinese rare earths, but these measures require time to yield tangible results. In the short term, the US remains constrained by China's leverage over rare earth exports, which continue to serve as a strategic bargaining chip. In the long term, the US may succeed in developing alternative sources through domestic production, allied partnerships, and recycling. However, these alternatives come with higher costs, inevitably raising supply chain expenses. Despite this, the trade-off is an improvement in supply chain security and national resilience. This strategic shift reflects Washington's recognition that supply chain reliability and geopolitical stability may justify higher economic costs in critical sectors like defense and high technology.

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