

**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 for  
Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 55

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**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity  
Exercise 2023 for Indonesia and the Region:  
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**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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\* Febry Triantama is a researcher and lecturer from Department of International Relations Paramadina University, Indonesia. Email: febry.triantama@paramadina.ac.id. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4586-3198.

*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

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

57

### **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.<sup>1</sup> Various forms of cooperation within ASEAN are also often viewed as ineffective.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, ASEAN is considered to have developed, as

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<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> This is attributed to several factors. Firstly, ASEX 2023 marked the first joint military exercise in ASEAN that

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<sup>4</sup> 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>.

<sup>5</sup> 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>.

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

**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 for  
Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 59

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involved all member countries exclusively.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> The growing political and economic influence of both powers on individual ASEAN member states has further challenged the bloc's cohesion and centrality.<sup>10</sup> Against this backdrop, ASEX 2023 reaffirmed ASEAN unity and readiness to face future conflicts, as emphasized in the opening remarks delivered by the Commander

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<sup>7</sup> 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."

<sup>8</sup> 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>.

<sup>9</sup> 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>.

<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, ASEX 2023 was the first joint military exercise in ASEAN to engage all three branches - Army, Navy, and Air Force simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> This is in contrast to the earlier ASEAN Multilateral Naval Exercise (AMNEX), which only involved seven ASEAN countries and exclusively focused on naval forces.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> This focus aligns with the

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<sup>11</sup> 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>.

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

<sup>13</sup> Swee. “ASEX-01N Strengthens the Intra-ASEAN Military Landscape.”

<sup>14</sup> 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.

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

61

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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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

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[https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2023/September/19sep23\\_nr#](https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2023/September/19sep23_nr#).

<sup>15</sup> Swee. "ASEX-01N Strengthens the Intra-ASEAN Military Landscape."

<sup>16</sup> 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>.

<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> All ASEAN member countries unanimously agreed to and supported Indonesia's initiative.<sup>19</sup>

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).<sup>20</sup> During this meeting, an agreement was reached to relocate the ASEX 2023 exercise from

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<sup>18</sup> 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>.

<sup>19</sup> 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/>.

<sup>20</sup> 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>.



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

63

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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> 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

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<sup>21</sup> 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."

<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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

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<sup>23</sup> 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."

<sup>24</sup> 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>.

<sup>25</sup> 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>.

**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 for  
Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 65

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As components of defense diplomacy, joint military exercises can be driven by four motives: (1) Confidence Building Measures,<sup>26</sup> (2) Strategic Engagements,<sup>27</sup> (3) Capacity Building,<sup>28</sup> and (4) Enhancement of international reputation.<sup>29</sup> 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

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<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> 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."

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

<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> Joint military exercises conducted by Indonesia with other countries are based on shared interests among participating nations.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup> Wolfley (2021) asserts

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

<sup>31</sup> 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>.

<sup>32</sup> 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

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

67

that nations are increasingly utilizing joint military exercises to influence friendly or adversarial nations.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

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

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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?"

<sup>33</sup> 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>.

<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, maintaining or improving combat readiness of forces. Thirdly, adapting and testing new doctrines and weapon technologies.<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup> Joint military exercises are even viewed

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<sup>35</sup> 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>.

<sup>36</sup> 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."

<sup>37</sup> 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

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

69

as one of the most effective and crucial defense diplomacy strategies.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

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.

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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."

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

<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup>

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

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<sup>40</sup> 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?”

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



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

71

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

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

<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup>

### 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.<sup>44</sup> 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

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

<sup>44</sup> 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>.

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

73

economic cooperation with one major power while strengthening defense ties with another—to mitigate risks without committing to binding alliances.<sup>45</sup> 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*.<sup>46</sup> Just like *hedging* strategies, States utilise Institutional Hedging, to mitigate risks associated with geopolitical uncertainty by exploiting multilateral institutions in a strategic manner.<sup>47</sup> 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

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

<sup>46</sup> 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.”

<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup>

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.<sup>50</sup> 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

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

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

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

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

75

organisations means to counterbalance global powers without openly aligning with any single party.<sup>51</sup>

### **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.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup>

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

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

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

77

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

### **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

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<sup>55</sup> 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



**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 for  
Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 79

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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.<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup>

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

<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> The naming of KRI Usman-Harun was considered to reopen old wounds and could

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<sup>58</sup> 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>.

<sup>59</sup> 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."

**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 for  
Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 81

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have negative consequences on the bilateral relations between the two countries.<sup>60</sup>

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.<sup>61</sup> As stated by various experts, the likelihood of conflict increases when there are sovereignty disputes and proximity.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> 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."

<sup>61</sup> 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>.

<sup>62</sup> 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.<sup>63</sup> This conflict was classified as an open conflict by the ASEAN Secretariat.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup>

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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>.

<sup>63</sup> 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>.

<sup>64</sup> 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.

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

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

83

### **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.<sup>66</sup>

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

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

<sup>66</sup> 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.<sup>67</sup> This also makes it difficult for ASEAN to form a united community, known as the ASEAN Community.<sup>68</sup>

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%.<sup>69</sup>

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

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<sup>67</sup> 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](http://www.rsis.edu.sg); Geoff Wade. "ASEAN Divides." New Mandala. December 23, 2010. <https://www.newmandala.org/asean-divides/>.

<sup>68</sup> Roberts. "The ASEAN Community: Trusting Thy Neighbour?"

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 for  
Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 85

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past conflicts. The presence of China's influence in ASEAN also contributes to division and distrust among ASEAN countries.<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup>

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

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

<sup>71</sup> 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>.

<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup> 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"<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> 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>.

<sup>74</sup> RRI. "Asex 01-Natuna Kunci Keberhasilan Jaga Perdamaian Kawasan ASEAN."



**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 for  
Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 87

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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.<sup>75</sup> 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.<sup>76</sup> Countries are not only confronted with the traditional threat of invasion from other nations but also non-traditional threats.<sup>77</sup>

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

<sup>76</sup> 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."

<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup>

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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>.

<sup>78</sup> 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.”

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

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

89

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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.<sup>80</sup> 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.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> 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>.

<sup>81</sup> 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."

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

91

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.<sup>82</sup> ASEX 2023 not only enhances the

<sup>82</sup> 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#](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\\_wEnPM27UqcCZoUeQuY4iR0kVeTnl0yhIFsnBzQXwRsICc2WttWrPFwA10IUu0brSR2jiwbWrpGJbHPRK6QPJgq3sHKmHk3qBOVILspS1QIMwB0XaQuG7bPQT1jd8sBEBcD69-s8\\_tM1w5Idh-3lPiJ29CPKCzOHoeWoUgGCXwSGHifx-F0MisB\\_-6Bx-vDkoe8UI3XW0Tf\\_ljoFPAD72FH7a0v6jedjse2vDPaX8YnPSD-nYs7aJxtLELCbNFSpcNTs89OO0FLuC6QFvXI\\_eE3svozvV4fjqGg8EnMCLj\\_w!!/dz/d5/L](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_wEnPM27UqcCZoUeQuY4iR0kVeTnl0yhIFsnBzQXwRsICc2WttWrPFwA10IUu0brSR2jiwbWrpGJbHPRK6QPJgq3sHKmHk3qBOVILspS1QIMwB0XaQuG7bPQT1jd8sBEBcD69-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.<sup>83</sup>

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.<sup>84</sup> 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

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<sup>83</sup> 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>.

<sup>84</sup> 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/#/>.

**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 for  
Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 93

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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.<sup>85</sup> Through an official press release, the Indonesian Military Headquarters explicitly expressed the hope that ASEX could create ASEAN interoperability in disaster management.<sup>86</sup> 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."<sup>87</sup>

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

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

<sup>86</sup> Puspen TNI. "Latihan Interoperabilitas Penanganan Bencana. ASEX -01 Tumbuhkan Soliditas ASEAN."

<sup>87</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup> 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.<sup>89</sup> Specifically for Indonesia, the recorded number of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Taiwan is 267,194<sup>90</sup>. The large number of citizens working in Taiwan increases the likelihood of a joint ASEAN HADR mission.<sup>91</sup>

## **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

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<sup>88</sup> 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/>.

<sup>89</sup> Yaacob. "ASEAN's First Joint Military Exercise."

<sup>90</sup> 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>.

<sup>91</sup> Yaacob. "ASEAN's First Joint Military Exercise."



**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 for  
Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 95

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motive of enhancing international reputation holds significant importance in defense diplomacy efforts.<sup>92</sup> Indonesia has been actively working in recent years to improve its reputation and prestige on the international stage, particularly as a regional leader.<sup>93</sup> 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.<sup>94</sup> 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.<sup>95</sup>

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

<sup>93</sup> 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>.

<sup>94</sup> 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>.

<sup>95</sup> 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.<sup>96</sup> Indonesia's leadership extends beyond their ASEAN Chairmanship, earning it the label of a natural leader within ASEAN.<sup>97</sup> The

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<sup>96</sup> 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>.

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

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

97

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.”<sup>98</sup>

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.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, there is a perception that the presence of competition between the United States and China weakens the solidarity of ASEAN members,

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<sup>98</sup> 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>.

<sup>99</sup> 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.<sup>100</sup> 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.<sup>101</sup>

## **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

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

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

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

99

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.<sup>102</sup> This aligns with the reality that ASEAN countries, in the future, will greatly benefit from joint operations in HADR, SAR, and Maritime Security missions.<sup>103</sup> Therefore, through the exercise content of ASEX 2023, ASEAN militaries can better understand each other's strengths and weaknesses, thereby enhancing interoperability.<sup>104</sup>

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

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

<sup>103</sup> 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.”

<sup>104</sup> 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.”<sup>105</sup> 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.<sup>106</sup> 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.<sup>107</sup> 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

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

<sup>106</sup> 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.”

<sup>107</sup> RRI. “Asex 01-Natuna Kunci Keberhasilan Jaga Perdamaian Kawasan ASEAN.”

**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 for  
Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 101

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

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.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> 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



**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 for  
Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 103

---

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.<sup>110</sup> 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.<sup>111</sup>

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

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<sup>110</sup> Gindarsah. "Strategic Hedging in Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy."

<sup>111</sup> 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.<sup>112</sup> 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.<sup>113</sup> However, according to data from The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), China is Singapore's main trading partner.<sup>114</sup> China's FDI flow into Singapore is also the largest compared to other ASEAN countries.<sup>115</sup> Therefore, if ASEAN chooses to adopt a

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<sup>112</sup> 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).

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

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

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

**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 for  
Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 105

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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.<sup>116</sup> 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.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> 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."

<sup>117</sup> 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.<sup>118</sup> 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

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and International Society.” *Contemporary Politics* 29, no. 5 (2023): 659–79.  
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<sup>118</sup> Kuik. “Hedging via Institutions: ASEAN-Led Multilateralism in the Age of the Indo-Pacific.”

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

107

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,<sup>119</sup> 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.<sup>120</sup> 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

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> 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.

**Unpacking the Significance of ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 for  
Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 109

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Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 111

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Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging**

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From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging**

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Indonesia and the Region:  
From Defense Diplomacy to Institutional Hedging** 121

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

127

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