



Indonesia–United States Military Cooperation in Capacity Building through the Garuda Shield Exercise

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Abstract: This article examines Indonesia–United States military cooperation in the context of capacity building through the Garuda Shield joint military exercise conducted between 2019 and 2022. Situated within the evolving Indo-Pacific security environment, the study explores how defence cooperation functions not only as a military training mechanism but also as an instrument of defence diplomacy and confidence building. Employing a qualitative descriptive research design, this study draws on secondary data sources including official government documents, defence policy papers, academic literature, and credible international media reports. The analysis is guided by realism, national interest theory, defence diplomacy, and confidence-building measures. The findings demonstrate that Garuda Shield significantly enhances military interoperability, operational readiness, and professional competence within the Indonesian Army, while simultaneously strengthening strategic trust between Indonesia and the United States. Moreover, the transformation of Garuda Shield into a multinational exercise in 2022 reflects increasing regional and international confidence in Indonesia's role as a stabilizing middle power in the Indo-Pacific. This article argues that Garuda Shield constitutes a strategic instrument of defence diplomacy that reinforces Indonesia's free and active foreign policy, enabling Indonesia to navigate intensifying great-power competition while maintaining strategic autonomy and contributing to a more inclusive regional security architecture.

Keywords: capacity building, defence diplomacy, Garuda Shield, Indonesia, United States

Abstrak: Artikel ini mengkaji kerja sama militer Indonesia–Amerika Serikat dalam konteks peningkatan kapasitas melalui latihan militer bersama Garuda Shield yang dilaksanakan antara tahun 2019 dan 2022. Bertempat dalam lingkungan keamanan Indo-Pasifik yang terus berkembang, studi ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana kerja sama

pertahanan berfungsi tidak hanya sebagai mekanisme pelatihan militer, tetapi juga sebagai instrumen diplomasi pertahanan dan pengembangan kepercayaan (confidence building). Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian deskriptif kualitatif, studi ini bersumber pada data sekunder yang mencakup dokumen resmi pemerintah, makalah kebijakan pertahanan, literatur akademik, serta laporan media internasional yang kredibel. Analisis ini dipandu oleh teori realisme, kepentingan nasional, diplomasi pertahanan, dan tindakan pembangunan kepercayaan (confidence-building measures). Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Garuda Shield secara signifikan meningkatkan interoperabilitas militer, kesiapan operasional, dan kompetensi profesional di lingkungan TNI Angkatan Darat, sekaligus memperkuat kepercayaan strategis antara Indonesia dan Amerika Serikat. Selain itu, transformasi Garuda Shield menjadi latihan multinasional pada tahun 2022 mencerminkan meningkatnya kepercayaan regional dan internasional terhadap peran Indonesia sebagai kekuatan penengah (middle power) yang stabil di Indo-Pasifik. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa Garuda Shield merupakan instrumen strategis diplomasi pertahanan yang memperkuat kebijakan luar negeri Indonesia yang bebas dan aktif, memungkinkan Indonesia untuk menavigasi persaingan kekuatan besar yang kian intensif sembari mempertahankan otonomi strategis dan berkontribusi pada arsitektur keamanan regional yang lebih inklusif.

Kata Kunci: diplomasi pertahanan, Garuda Shield, Indonesia, peningkatan kapasitas, Amerika Serikat.

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the central arena of contemporary international security, shaped by intensifying strategic rivalry, shifting power balances, and the increasing salience of military preparedness. The rise of China as a major economic and military power, the sustained strategic presence of the United States, and the strategic responses of regional actors have transformed the Indo-Pacific into a focal point of global geopolitics (Heiduk and Wacker 2020). Maritime disputes, freedom of navigation concerns, and the growing frequency of joint and multinational military exercises underscore the region's strategic importance and highlight the central role of defence cooperation in managing stability (Emmers 2018).

For middle powers, these dynamics generate a complex strategic dilemma. On the one hand, growing geopolitical competition increases the need to strengthen defense capabilities and enhance operational readiness. On the other hand, excessive alignment with major powers risks eroding strategic autonomy and undermining diplomatic credibility (Acharya 2014). Indonesia, as the largest country in Southeast Asia and a pivotal maritime state, confronts this dilemma acutely. Its geographic position at the crossroads of the Indian and Pacific Oceans places Indonesia at the heart of critical sea lanes of communication, making regional stability a core national interest (Ciorciari and Welch 2021).

Indonesia has long responded to such challenges through its “free and active” foreign policy doctrine. Rather than entering formal military alliances, Indonesia seeks to maintain strategic flexibility by engaging multiple partners while actively contributing to regional peace and stability (Leifer 1983). In the defense sector, this doctrine is operationalized through military cooperation, joint exercises, training programs, and capacity-building initiatives that enhance professionalism without compromising sovereignty. Defence cooperation thus becomes a strategic tool that allows Indonesia to strengthen its military capabilities while avoiding entanglement in great-power rivalry (Emmers 2018).

One of the most prominent manifestations of Indonesia’s defense cooperation strategy is the Garuda Shield joint military exercise between the Indonesian Army (Tentara Nasional Indonesia Angkatan Darat, TNI-AD) and the United States Army. Established in 2009, Garuda Shield initially functioned as a limited bilateral training platform aimed primarily at improving basic tactical coordination, small-unit maneuvers, and operational interoperability. During its early phase, the exercise involved a relatively modest number of troops and focused on conventional field training activities conducted at selected training areas in Indonesia.

A significant transformation occurred during the 2019–2022 period, when Garuda Shield expanded markedly in scale, complexity, and strategic meaning. First, troop participation increased substantially, reflecting greater institutional commitment from both sides. Second, training scenarios evolved from basic bilateral drills into multi-domain and scenario-based exercises, incorporating combined command-post exercises, joint planning processes, and non-traditional

security components such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. These changes indicate a shift from tactical familiarity toward operational and strategic-level capacity building. Third, and most critically, Garuda Shield began to assume a broader diplomatic and strategic role. The inclusion of observer states and partner forces prior to 2022 signaled Indonesia's intention to frame the exercise as an open and confidence-building platform rather than an exclusive bilateral arrangement. This trajectory culminated in Garuda Shield 2022, which was conducted as a multinational exercise involving several regional and extra-regional partners. The multinational configuration marked a qualitative shift in Indonesia–United States defense cooperation, transforming Garuda Shield into a mechanism for inclusive regional engagement rather than bilateral alignment (U.S. Army Pacific 2022).

From a strategic perspective, this evolution reflects Indonesia's deliberate effort to leverage military exercises as instruments of defense diplomacy. By expanding Garuda Shield incrementally, Indonesia enhanced military capacity and interoperability while simultaneously signaling its commitment to cooperative security and strategic autonomy. The exercise thus illustrates how a middle power can recalibrate defense cooperation in response to a changing Indo-Pacific security environment without abandoning its non-aligned foreign policy orientation.

Table 1. Evolution of the Garuda Shield Exercise (2019–2022)

Year	Format	Estimated Troop Participation	Countries	Key Training Activities	Strategic Significance
2019	Bilateral	~4,000 personnel	Indonesia, United States	Field training exercises, infantry maneuver drills, combined	Consolidation of bilateral military cooperation

				tactical operations	
2020	Bilateral (limited)	~3,000 personnel	Indonesia, United States	Adapted tactical drills, command coordination under health restrictions	Continuity of cooperation amid disruption
2021	Bilateral (expanded)	~4,500 personnel	Indonesia, United States	Joint planning processes, command-post exercises, integrated scenario simulations	Enhanced operational readiness
2022	Multinational	~5,000+ personnel	Indonesia, United States, and partner states	Multinational coordination, complex combined arms scenarios, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief	Defense diplomacy & regional confidence building

				(HADR) simulations	
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Source: compiled from official releases and reports by U.S. Army Pacific (2022) and Indonesian defense authorities.

Despite its increasing prominence, Garuda Shield remains underexamined in academic literature, particularly from Indonesia's perspective. Much of the existing scholarship on Indo-Pacific security and military exercises focuses on the strategic objectives of major powers, often framing joint exercises as instruments of deterrence, containment, or power projection (Mastro 2019). Such approaches risk overlooking the agency of middle powers and the ways in which they utilize defence cooperation to advance national interests while preserving autonomy. As a result, Indonesia's strategic calculations and capacity-building outcomes associated with Garuda Shield have not been sufficiently analysed.

This article seeks to address that gap by examining Indonesia–United States military cooperation through the lens of capacity building, defense diplomacy, and confidence-building measures, with a specific focus on the Garuda Shield exercise during the period 2019–2022. The central research question guiding this study is: How does the Garuda Shield exercise contribute to Indonesia's military capacity building and national interests within the evolving Indo-Pacific security environment? By addressing this question, the article contributes to broader debates on middle-power agency, non-aligned defence cooperation, and regional security governance.

The article argues that Garuda Shield functions not merely as a military training exercise, but as a strategic instrument of defence diplomacy. Through this mechanism, Indonesia enhances military professionalism, strengthens interoperability, and builds confidence with key partners while maintaining its free and active foreign policy orientation. In doing so, Indonesia demonstrates how a non-aligned middle power can actively shape its security environment amid intensifying great-power competition (Acharya 2018).

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative explanatory research design to examine Indonesia–United States military cooperation through the Garuda Shield joint military exercise during the period 2019–2022. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this study because it allows for an in-depth analysis of strategic intent, institutional interaction, and diplomatic meaning embedded in military cooperation, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone (Creswell 2014). Rather than treating Garuda Shield merely as a technical military exercise, this study conceptualizes it as a policy-relevant security practice situated within the broader Indo-Pacific strategic environment. The research design therefore prioritizes interpretation, contextualization, and analytical depth to explain how capacity building, defense diplomacy, and confidence-building measures operate in practice.

Garuda Shield was selected as the central case study due to its long-standing continuity, strategic expansion, and symbolic importance in Indonesia–United States defence relations. The period 2019–2022 is analytically significant because it captures three distinct phases of the exercise: (1) consolidation as a bilateral exercise, (2) expansion in scale and complexity, and (3) transformation into a multinational exercise. This temporal scope enables longitudinal analysis of policy evolution and strategic outcomes. The unit of analysis is defence cooperation as a strategic practice, rather than individual military units or tactical outcomes. This allows the study to focus on how Garuda Shield contributes to Indonesia’s national interests and regional positioning.

This study relies exclusively on secondary data, which are appropriate given the focus on policy analysis and strategic interpretation. Data were collected from multiple categories of sources to ensure analytical robustness and triangulation. These sources include:

1. Official documents and press releases issued by the Indonesian Ministry of Defense and the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI);
2. Official publications and reports from the United States Department of Defense and U.S. Army Pacific;

3. Academic journal articles and books on Indo-Pacific security, defense diplomacy, and military cooperation;
4. Policy reports and think-tank publications relevant to regional security dynamics;
5. Reputable international and national media coverage of the Garuda Shield exercise.

The use of diverse sources enables cross-verification and reduces reliance on single-actor narratives, which is particularly important in studies of security cooperation (George and Bennett 2005). Data were analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis, following an iterative process of coding, categorization, and interpretation. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes related to:

- military capacity building,
- interoperability and professionalization,
- defense diplomacy functions, and
- confidence-building outcomes.

The analytical process involved comparing official narratives, policy statements, and scholarly interpretations to identify convergences and divergences. This approach allows the study to move beyond descriptive accounts and provide explanatory insights into the strategic significance of Garuda Shield. To ensure analytical clarity, the study operationalizes key concepts—capacity building, defense diplomacy, and confidence-building measures—into observable indicators. These indicators guide systematic analysis across sources and time periods. Table 2 summarizes the methodological framework and operational indicators used in this study.

Table 2. Research Design and Analytical Framework

Component	Description
Research Approach	Qualitative explanatory case study
Case Selection	Garuda Shield joint military exercise (Indonesia–United States)

Temporal Scope	2019–2022
Unit of Analysis	Defense cooperation as a strategic and diplomatic practice
Data Sources	Government documents, military press releases, academic literature, policy reports, reputable media
Analytical Technique	Thematic qualitative analysis
Key Analytical Dimensions	Capacity building, interoperability, defense diplomacy, confidence-building measures
Theoretical Framework	Realism, national interest theory, defense diplomacy, confidence-building measures
Validation Strategy	Data triangulation across multiple source types

Four core analytical dimensions guide the study: capacity building, interoperability, defense diplomacy, and confidence-building measures. Each dimension is translated into specific operational indicators that can be identified within the available data. Capacity building is operationalized through indicators such as the complexity of training activities, exposure to joint command and planning processes, institutional learning, and reinforcement of professional military norms. Interoperability is assessed through evidence of joint planning procedures, command-post exercises, communication and coordination mechanisms, and the ability of participating forces to operate under integrated scenarios.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employs data triangulation, comparing information across official documents, academic sources, and independent reports. This operationalization enables systematic thematic analysis across the 2019–2022 period and strengthens the linkage between theoretical concepts and empirical evidence. This approach reduces the risk of bias associated with single-source analysis and strengthens interpretive validity (Yin 2018). While the study does not aim for statistical generalization, the transparent analytical framework allows for analytical generalization, contributing to broader discussions on middle-power defense diplomacy and regional security governance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the findings, examining how the Garuda Shield exercise contributes to Indonesia's military capacity building and strategic positioning within the Indo-Pacific security environment. Moving beyond a descriptive account of activities, this discussion situates empirical findings within the theoretical framework of realism, defense diplomacy, and confidence-building measures. The analysis is structured into five interrelated dimensions: (1) capacity building and military professionalization, (2) interoperability and operational readiness, (3) defense diplomacy and confidence building, (4) strategic signaling and middle-power agency, and (5) broader implications for regional security architecture.

Capacity Building and Military Professionalization

The first major finding concerns the role of Garuda Shield in strengthening military capacity building, particularly in terms of human capital development, institutional learning, and professional military norms within the Indonesian Army. Capacity building in this context is not limited to the acquisition of tactical skills, but encompasses broader improvements in leadership, organizational culture, and doctrinal familiarity.

Between 2019 and 2022, Garuda Shield demonstrated a clear progression in training depth and complexity. Early iterations focused primarily on basic interoperability and tactical coordination, while later exercises incorporated combined planning, joint command-post simulations, and scenario-based operations that required higher levels of coordination and decision-making. Indonesian officers and non-commissioned officers were increasingly exposed to international standards of planning, command responsibility, and mission execution. This exposure contributes to professionalization by reinforcing merit-based leadership, procedural discipline, and accountability.

From a national interest perspective, this form of capacity building strengthens Indonesia's defense posture without escalating regional tensions. Rather than emphasizing force projection or offensive capability, Garuda Shield prioritizes professionalism and readiness. This aligns with Indonesia's strategic

culture, which emphasizes defense sufficiency and internal resilience rather than external power projection. In realist terms, enhanced professionalism increases deterrence credibility while maintaining a non-provocative profile.

Moreover, Garuda Shield supports Indonesia's long-term defense reform agenda by reinforcing civil–military norms consistent with democratic governance. Training modules related to humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and peace support operations further broaden the scope of professional military education. These aspects are particularly relevant given Indonesia's frequent involvement in domestic disaster response and international peacekeeping missions. Table 2 provides a structured overview of the multidimensional capacity-building outcomes observed during the study period.

Table 3. Multidimensional Capacity-Building Outcomes of Garuda Shield
(2019–2022)

Dimension	Mechanism	Results
Tactical Capability	Improved small-unit coordination, maneuver skills, and combined drills	Improved small-unit coordination, maneuver proficiency, and overall operational readiness
Leadership Development	Exposure to joint command structures and decision-making processes	Strengthened professional leadership, merit-based command responsibility, and accountability
Institutional Learning	Familiarity with joint planning cycles and standardized procedures	Enhanced institutional capacity and support for long-term defense modernization
Normative Professionalism	Reinforcement of international military norms and discipline	Alignment with democratic civil–military norms and increased credibility of deterrence without provocation

Non-Traditional Security	Training in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief	Broader military utility, improved readiness for domestic disaster response and peacekeeping missions
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Interoperability and Operational Readiness

A second critical finding relates to the enhancement of interoperability and operational readiness. Interoperability in Garuda Shield extends beyond technical compatibility to include shared situational awareness, communication effectiveness, and procedural alignment. This is particularly important for Indonesia, given its participation in multinational operations and regional security initiatives. The expansion of Garuda Shield in 2021 represented a turning point in interoperability outcomes. Larger troop participation and diversified training locations required more advanced coordination mechanisms, including joint planning cells and integrated command arrangements. Indonesian forces were required to adapt to faster operational tempos and more complex decision-making environments, thereby improving readiness under realistic conditions.

The multinational transition in 2022 further elevated interoperability requirements. Indonesian forces interacted not only with U.S. units but also with multiple partner militaries, each with distinct operational cultures and procedures. This experience enhanced flexibility and adaptability, two critical attributes for middle powers operating in a fluid security environment. Importantly, enhanced interoperability did not translate into dependency. Instead, it expanded Indonesia's ability to cooperate selectively with diverse partners.

From a strategic standpoint, this finding challenges assumptions that interoperability necessarily leads to alignment. In the case of Garuda Shield, interoperability strengthens Indonesia's strategic autonomy by broadening its operational options rather than narrowing them.

Defense Diplomacy and Confidence Building

Beyond operational outcomes, Garuda Shield serves as a significant instrument of defense diplomacy and confidence-building measures (CBMs). The findings show that regular, institutionalized military interaction contributes to trust-building at

both bilateral and multilateral levels. Unlike ad hoc engagements, Garuda Shield provides a predictable and transparent framework for cooperation. At the bilateral level, Garuda Shield reinforces stable Indonesia–United States defense relations. Repeated interaction reduces uncertainty, mitigates misperception, and fosters professional familiarity. These effects are particularly valuable during periods of broader geopolitical tension, as military-to-military communication channels remain open even when political relations fluctuate. At the multilateral level, the inclusion of additional participants in 2022 enhanced regional confidence. By framing the exercise as inclusive rather than exclusive, Indonesia avoided signaling bloc formation. This approach aligns with Indonesia’s diplomatic emphasis on ASEAN centrality and cooperative security. Garuda Shield thus complements regional confidence-building efforts by demonstrating transparency and restraint. Table 4 summarizes the defense diplomacy and CBM functions of Garuda Shield.

Table 4. Garuda Shield as Defense Diplomacy and Confidence-Building
Mechanism

Level	Mechanism	Function	Outcomes
Bilateral	Institutionalized and routine joint military exercises	Trust-building and communication	Increased strategic trust, reduced uncertainty, and stable Indonesia–United States defense relations
Multilateral	Inclusive participation of partner states	Transparency, openness, and avoidance of exclusive bloc signaling	Enhanced regional confidence and reduced perceptions of alignment or containment
Diplomatic	Regular military-to-military dialogue embedded in joint exercises	Support for Indonesia’s free and active	Maintenance of strategic autonomy alongside

		foreign policy orientation	cooperative defense relations
Strategic	Predictable and recurring exercise framework	Risk mitigation and management of misperception	Lower risk of miscalculation and contribution to regional stability

A key contribution of this study lies in highlighting Indonesia's strategic agency. Garuda Shield is not imposed externally, but actively shaped by Indonesia through decisions on exercise design, scenario selection, and participant inclusion. This agency is most evident in the 2022 multinational expansion, which positioned Indonesia as a convening actor rather than a subordinate partner. From a realist perspective, this strategy enhances security without sacrificing autonomy. From a constructivist-inflected defence diplomacy perspective, it reinforces Indonesia's identity as a stabilizing middle power committed to cooperative security. Garuda Shield thus functions as a platform for strategic signalling, demonstrating Indonesia's capability, credibility, and diplomatic intent. This finding challenges narratives that portray middle powers as constrained or reactive actors within great-power competition. Instead, Garuda Shield illustrates how middle powers can exercise agenda-setting capacity through carefully designed defence cooperation.

Taken together, the findings indicate that Garuda Shield generates layered and mutually reinforcing outcomes. Capacity building enhances professionalism, interoperability improves readiness, confidence building stabilizes relations, and strategic signalling reinforces Indonesia's regional role. These outcomes collectively support Indonesia's national interests and contribute to regional stability.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the Garuda Shield joint military exercise constitutes a strategic instrument of capacity building and defense diplomacy for Indonesia rather than merely a routine military training activity. Through the period 2019–

2022, Garuda Shield has evolved in scale, scope, and strategic significance, reflecting Indonesia's adaptive response to the changing Indo-Pacific security environment. The findings demonstrate that Indonesia utilizes defense cooperation with the United States in a manner that strengthens military capability while preserving strategic autonomy in accordance with its long-standing free and active foreign policy doctrine.

At the military level, Garuda Shield contributes substantively to capacity building and professionalization within the Indonesian Army. Improvements in human capital, institutional learning, and interoperability enhance operational readiness without emphasizing offensive force projection. This approach reinforces deterrence through professionalism and preparedness rather than escalation, aligning with Indonesia's strategic culture and defense orientation. Importantly, capacity building achieved through Garuda Shield extends beyond technical skills to include leadership development, procedural discipline, and adherence to international military norms. At the diplomatic level, Garuda Shield functions as an effective confidence-building measure and platform for defense diplomacy. Regular and institutionalized interaction between Indonesian and United States forces reduces uncertainty, builds strategic trust, and maintains open communication channels even amid broader geopolitical tensions. The transformation of Garuda Shield into a multinational exercise in 2022 further amplifies its diplomatic value by signaling inclusivity and transparency, thereby contributing to regional confidence and stability rather than bloc formation.

From a strategic perspective, this study highlights Indonesia's agency as a middle power in shaping defense cooperation. Rather than being a passive participant in great-power initiatives, Indonesia actively designs and frames Garuda Shield to serve national interests and regional objectives. By acting as a convening actor in the multinational phase of the exercise, Indonesia reinforces its role as a stabilizing force in the Indo-Pacific and demonstrates that middle powers can exercise agenda-setting capacity through carefully calibrated military cooperation.

Theoretically, this article contributes to the literature by integrating realism, national interest theory, defense diplomacy, and confidence-building measures to explain military cooperation among non-aligned states. The case of Garuda Shield

illustrates that cooperation and autonomy are not mutually exclusive; instead, defense diplomacy can complement realist security strategies by enabling states to enhance capability while managing risk and uncertainty. This finding challenges deterministic interpretations of great-power dominance and underscores the importance of middle-power perspectives in Indo-Pacific security studies.

From a policy standpoint, the findings suggest that joint military exercises can serve as multifunctional tools that simultaneously support military readiness, diplomatic engagement, and regional stability. For Indonesia, Garuda Shield offers a model of how defense cooperation can be leveraged to navigate intensifying great-power competition without compromising sovereignty or diplomatic flexibility. For the broader region, the exercise demonstrates the potential of inclusive, capacity-focused military cooperation to contribute to a more cooperative and resilient security architecture.

Future research could extend this analysis by comparing Garuda Shield with other regional exercises, examining perceptions of additional participating states, or exploring the long-term institutional effects of multinational military cooperation. Such studies would further enrich understanding of defense diplomacy and middle-power strategies in the Indo-Pacific.

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