

Recalibrating Indonesia's Diplomacy in the Pacific: Strategic Engagement for Economic Cooperation and Sovereignty Safeguarding

Yulius Mada Kaka

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

Correspondent: yuliusmada@mail.ugm.ac.id

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Indonesia's diplomatic engagement with the Pacific nations in the context of geopolitical rivalry and economic opportunities. Indonesia has pursued development assistance, scholarships, cultural programs, and limited security cooperation, yet its diplomacy remains shaped by the issue of sovereignty concerning Papua. Using descriptive qualitative methods and policy analysis, the study explores how Indonesia's Pacific engagement reflects what this paper terms The Pacific Paradox—the simultaneous pursuit of expansionary influence and defensive sovereignty. The findings show that initiatives remain fragmented and transactional, limiting Jakarta's credibility compared to major powers. To address these challenges, Indonesia's diplomacy to the region can be done by establishing a comprehensive regulatory framework for Pacific diplomacy; promoting buying missions to enhance economic linkages; and introducing a Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) scheme for selected countries. These strategies would strengthen Indonesia's regional posture and foster long-term partnerships while safeguarding its national interests.

Keywords: Indonesia, Pacific Diplomacy, Relational Cooperation, Economic Engagement, Soft Power.



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INTRODUCTION

The Pacific region has become as one of the most pivotal arenas in current international relations. Its strategic value lies not only in vast natural resources and maritime routes but also in demographic trends and advances in technology. Over the past decade, scholars have increasingly recognized that competition among major and middle powers in the Pacific reflects broader transformations in global order (Wallis et al., 2025). For Indonesia, which sits at the intersection of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the question is no longer whether to engage, but how to reposition itself more strategically in this evolving geopolitical landscape.

Indonesia's policy discourse—most visibly articulated in the concepts of the *Global Maritime Fulcrum* and the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*—signaled the ambition to act as a maritime power and constructive partner in the Pacific (Scott, 2019). Yet, ambition alone is insufficient. Political articulations, such as President Prabowo Subianto's speech at the APEC CEO Summit in 2024, affirm that the Pacific is central to Indonesia's long-term economic and geopolitical vision (Subianto, 2024). Still, these commitments have not fully translated into coherent strategies or consistent implementation. One may then ask: how can Indonesia bridge the gap between aspiration and action?

It is indicated that Indonesia's engagement with the Pacific region has largely been relied on transactional diplomacy such as providing development aid, offering humanitarian assistance, awarding scholarships like Developing Countries Partnership (KPNB), Darmasiswa or The Indonesian Aid Scholarship (TIAS), and pursuing limited security cooperation (Dugis & Wardhani, 2023). While these measures foster goodwill, they remain insufficient to overcome the enduring sensitivities surrounding Papua, an issue that continues to shape how Pacific nations perceive Indonesia (Zahidi, 2018). As a result, Jakarta's presence is often reactive and fragmented, particularly when compared to the sustained influence of larger actors like the United States, China, or even Australia (Firth, 2021; Laurenceson, 2025).

This complexity situates Indonesia at a critical stage. On one hand, it must protect sovereignty and territorial integrity. On the other, it cannot ignore the relational demands of Pacific neighbors who seek impartial cooperation and trust-building (Laurenceson & Armstrong, 2023). The tension between sovereignty concerns and partnership-building represents the empirical and theoretical puzzle that this article seeks to address.

Therefore, this study proposes two purposes. *First*, it aims to analyze Indonesia's current diplomatic practices in the Pacific, particularly in relation to regional organizations such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). *Second*, it seeks to identify how Indonesia can reshape its approach from being merely transactional to relational—emphasizing trust, mutual benefit, and long-term collaboration. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on sovereignty defense (Astuti et al., 2022), this article contributes by integrating perspectives of political diplomacy and international relations with strategic options that emphasize sustained cooperation. This novelty lies in demonstrating how Indonesia can balance its sovereignty imperatives with the practical need to foster credible partnerships in the Pacific, thereby enriching both the scholarly debate and policy practice.

Neoclassical Realism and Sovereignty Concerns

Neoclassical realism provides a valuable lens for analyzing Indonesia's diplomacy in the Pacific (Rose, 1998). Unlike classical realism, which focuses primarily on material power, this approach emphasizes the interplay between external pressures and domestic factors in shaping foreign policy choices (Schweller, 2018). States respond not only to structural limitation but also to leaders' perceptions, internal political dynamics, and societal sensitivities. In Indonesia's case, sovereignty concerns—especially those linked to Papua—emerge as the most persistent driver that informs its diplomatic calculations.

The broader geopolitical environment enhances these concerns. The intensifying rivalry between the United States and China in the Pacific is not merely about trade or investment but also about political legitimacy and influence (Arkananta, 2025; Laurenceson, 2025). Positioned at the crossroads of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Indonesia cannot escape these opposing forces. The risk is obvious: regional platforms such as the *Pacific Islands Forum* (PIF) or the *Melanesian Spearhead Group* (MSG) may become venues where external actors intensify the Papua issue, challenging Indonesia's territorial integrity. One might ask: how can Jakarta navigate such stormy waters without destroying its credibility as a constructive Pacific partner?

Indonesia's response reveals a dual-track strategy. On the one hand, it projects soft power—through scholarships, cultural programs, and development aid—to pursue goodwill and relational ties. On the other hand, these gestures are often accompanied by defensive maneuvers, designed to prevent the internationalization of Papua issue. This paradox is precisely what neoclassical realism helps to explain. The pursuit of regional influence proceeds alongside efforts to preserve national interests from external scrutiny. Diplomacy, in this sense, becomes a balancing act between expansion and protection.

Seen through this theoretical frame, Indonesia's Pacific diplomacy is neither linear nor free from contradictions. Instead, it embodies the dilemmas of a middle power caught between global pressures and domestic imperatives (Wesley, 2019). Sovereignty remains the center of gravity around which strategies revolve. Neoclassical realism thus underscores that Indonesia's engagement in the Pacific is not simply about gaining influence, but also about preventing loss. Perhaps this is what makes Indonesia's case distinctive: striving to be recognized as a "Pacific neighbor" while simultaneously guarding the devotion of its own territorial home.

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine how Indonesia's Pacific diplomacy expand in practice. By situating empirical evidence—policy speeches, official documents, and regional communiqués—within the neoclassical realist framework (Smith, 2022), the analysis seeks to trace how sovereignty concerns shape both the substance and style of engagement. This methodological choice is designed to capture the tensions between aspiration and constraint, between Indonesia's efforts to project influence and its simultaneous need to defend territorial integrity. The following section elaborates on the research design, data sources, and analytical procedures employed to ensure that these dynamics are examined systematically and with scholarly rigor.

METHOD

This section outlines the methodological choices that guide the study. The design is structured to ensure that the theoretical framework—particularly neoclassical realism—can be meaningfully aligned to empirical evidence (Rose, 1998). Each stage, from research type to data collection and analysis, is explained to provide clarity and transparency. In doing so, the methods highlight not only the technical steps undertaken but also the rationale behind them (Bowen, 2009), allowing readers to see how Indonesia's Pacific diplomacy is examined systematically through publicly available documents, regional policy records, and scholarly contributions.

Research Type

This study employs a descriptive qualitative, single-case design focused on Indonesia's diplomacy in the Pacific. The approach is suitable for unpacking policy dynamics (Wendt, 1999) where context, meanings, and processes are central (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). To keep analysis anchored in the study's theoretical stance, a framework-informed policy analysis is applied, allowing us to connect sovereignty concerns to concrete diplomatic practices and outcomes in regional for a (Hummel et al., 2021).

Population and Sample/Informants

This study's inquiry is document-based. Thus, the "population" refers to policy texts and authoritative records rather than human participants. The corpus includes: (a) official speeches and statements (e.g., President Prabowo Subianto's APEC CEO Summit 2024 address; MFA communiqués), (b) regional documents from Pacific platforms (PIF, MSG), and (c) peer-reviewed literature on Pacific regionalism and Indonesia's foreign policy published mainly 2018–2025. Sampling was purposive with iterative (theoretical) expansion: initial seed documents were identified from the manuscript's reference trail, then snowballed to adjacent policy texts and regional communiqués until conceptual saturation—i.e., no substantively new themes appeared.

Research Location

The research is desk-based (Allen, 2017) but substantively situated in the Pacific policy arena. The geographic scope follows the region's institutional boundaries—Melanesia and the wider PIF membership—while the political locus centers on Indonesia's state institutions and their engagement across Pacific platforms. In short, the "site" is institutional rather than physical.

Instrumentation or Tools

Data were organized with a structured codebook and managed in a spreadsheet environment (Microsoft Excel) to track codes, memos, and document metadata (source, date, issuer, venue). Reference management followed APA 7th with Mendeley to ensure accurate citation control, consistent with journal guidance. No proprietary qualitative software is required for replication.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through several considerations. (1) *Scoping & eligibility criteria*. Researcher specified inclusion criteria ex ante: public, official, or peer-reviewed sources; direct relevance to Indonesia–Pacific diplomacy; and publication or delivery 2018–2025. (2) *Document identification*. Seed documents were drawn from the manuscript ((PIFS, 2022); APEC 2024 speech) and expanded via snowballing across ministerial sites and regional secretariats. (3) *Screening & logging*. Each document's bibliographic and contextual metadata were recorded (issuer, forum, date, audience, policy instrument invoked). (4) *Corpus finalization*. The set was closed upon thematic sufficiency—when additional items no longer altered the codebook's structure or the policy options inferred. (5) *Audit trail*. Decisions on inclusion/exclusion, codebook revisions, and analytic memos were time-stamped to enhance transparency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded in three integrated stages, aligning method with the study's theoretical commitments:

1. Document analysis. Policy texts and speeches were open-coded to extract recurrent ideas, frames, and instruments (e.g., soft-power gestures, defensive moves, institutional pathways). Codes were iteratively refined to fit the sovereignty-sensitivity lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
2. Thematic synthesis. Codes were clustered into higher-order themes representing patterned responses (e.g., transactional vs. relational postures; forum-led engagement; insulation against Papua internationalization). The synthesis emphasized coherence across documents and contrast across forums (e.g., PIF vs. MSG).
3. Framework-guided policy analysis. Themes were interpreted through a neoclassical realist view (external pressure $\times$ domestic constraints) to explain why certain diplomatic choices recur. We then mapped policy options (near-term to longer-horizon) that are internally coherent with the sovereignty imperative while remaining credible in Pacific settings. The result is a set of options that are both explanatory and actionable in political–IR terms.

Ethical Approval (Optional)

This study analyzes publicly available documents and peer-reviewed literature; it does not involve human subjects, personal data, or confidential materials. Nonetheless, all sources are attributed transparently, and interpretive claims are bounded by an explicit audit trail and reproducible inclusion criteria.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Indonesia's Current Engagement in the Pacific

The results indicate that Indonesia's engagement with Pacific states has become increasingly visible, yet fragmented. Jakarta's diplomatic portfolio relies on development assistance, scholarship programs, and limited security cooperation. Such instruments resemble as *soft power practices* (Nye, 2021), namely attempts to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion (Djumala, 2021). Programs like the Developing Countries Partnership, Darmasiswa, and the recently launched Indonesian Aid Scholarship (TIAS) are consistent with these logics of attraction. They offer cultural legitimacy, but as Wilson ((Wilson, 2019)) reminds us, soft power does not automatically translate into trust, especially in regions where historical grievances remain unresolved. This tension is evident in Indonesia's case: while scholarships and infrastructure aid have been welcomed, skepticism tied to Papua continues to dominate perceptions among Pacific audiences (Djumala & Surya, 2021; Wardhani & Dugis, 2020).

The MSG illustrates this contradiction. Indonesia's associate membership since 2015 should, in theory, have expanded its regional influence. Realist accounts, however, argue that membership alone is insufficient if material or normative alignment is lacking (Reilly, 2020; Schweller, 2018). Evidence from MSG debates confirms this: although Indonesia has contributed through police training and development support, Papua remains a contested issue that constrains deeper trust.

Constructivist scholars argue that identity politics play a decisive role in shaping such perceptions (Acharya, 2014). The finding here supports that view—Melanesian solidarity frames Indonesia not as a partner, but as a state under constant scrutiny. This interplay between realist calculations and constructivist identity politics complicates Indonesia's position, reinforcing neoclassical realism's emphasis on how external and domestic constraints intersect.

The PIF presents another dimension. Guided by the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent (PIFS, 2022), PIF prioritizes climate change, ocean governance, and disaster resilience. Scholars have argued that engagement in these areas opens opportunities for middle powers like Indonesia to expand credibility (Tarte, 2019; Wallis et al., 2025). The findings show that Indonesia has begun to align with these priorities through its blue-economy discourse and environmental cooperation. Yet the initiatives often appear ad hoc, lacking integration into a coherent long-term plan. This confirms critiques by Scott (Scott, 2019) and Laurenceson & Armstrong (Laurenceson & Armstrong, 2023), who suggest that Indonesia's Indo-Pacific rhetoric often remains aspirational rather than operational. The study therefore validates previous scholarship while also demonstrating, through empirical examples, how fragmented execution undermines otherwise ambitious discourse (He, 2021).

Emerging Trends and Strategic Pathways

The results also suggest that under President Prabowo's administration, Indonesia is repositioning the Pacific as a strategic frontier. Support for Papua New Guinea's prospective ASEAN membership exemplifies Jakarta's intent to weave Pacific concerns into broader regional frameworks. The novelty here lies not in participation per se but in reframing engagement through institutional linkages. As Bayne and Woolcock (Bayne & Woolcock, 2017) note, economic diplomacy is most effective when embedded in institutionalized channels (Okano-Heijmans, 2013), rather than episodic gestures. Indonesia's initiatives—buying missions, preferential tariffs through the GSP scheme, and outbound investment in fisheries and blue economy—reflect this potential. Still, unless consolidated into a regulatory framework, these policies risk being dismissed as reactive or transactional, a critique also highlighted by Zahidi (Zahidi, 2018) in his study of Indonesia's limited influence within MSG.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings reinforce the centrality of sovereignty concerns as emphasized by neoclassical realism. Domestic anxieties over Papua intersect with external pressures from U.S.–China rivalry, producing what Rose (Rose, 1998) describes as “foreign policy filtered through internal constraints.” The study thus illustrates how Indonesia's strategies are both expansive and defensive, a duality echoed by Reilly (Reilly, 2020) who observed similar dynamics in small-state Pacific diplomacy. Yet the results also complicate realist assumptions. Constructivist perspectives suggest that without addressing identity politics, soft power tools may fail to shift perceptions (Acharya, 2014). The evidence from scholarships and cultural programs in this study supports that cautionary view: attraction alone does not build legitimacy when sovereignty is under contestation.

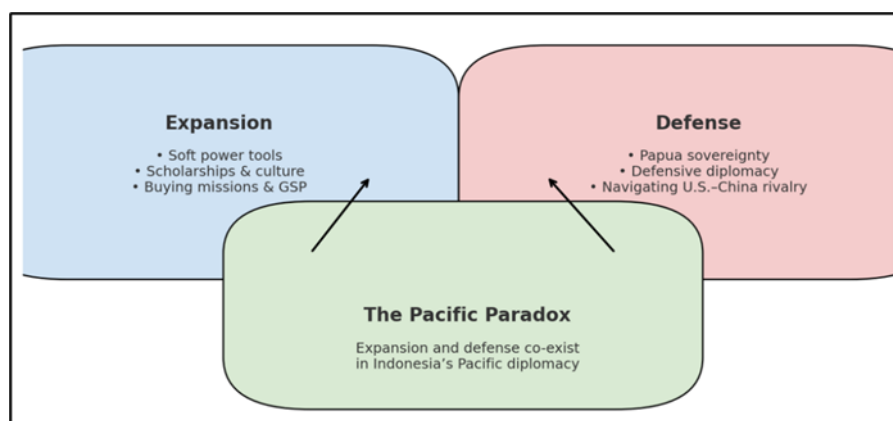
The policy options identified—regulatory frameworks, buying missions, and GSP extension—embody this dual-track logic. They are simultaneously protective of sovereignty and projective of

influence. Scholars of middle-power diplomacy argue that such strategies are essential to avoid marginalization in contested regions (He, 2021; Kuik, 2020). At the same time, critics warn that transactional gestures, unless embedded in trust-based partnerships, will reinforce rather than resolve skepticism (Akhmad & Dir, 2022; Tarte, 2019). By situating Indonesia's initiatives within these debates, evidence suggests that its Pacific diplomacy represents not a simple success or failure but an evolving negotiation between defense and engagement.

Placed together, the findings underscore the dilemmas of a state that aspires to recognition as a "Pacific neighbor" while simultaneously fearing delegitimization over its internal sovereignty. The evidence resonates with neoclassical realism's emphasis on vulnerability, but it also gestures toward the need for constructivist sensitivity and institutional embedding. If anything, the results suggest that Indonesia's Pacific diplomacy should not be read only as fragmented, but as caught in the very paradox of middle-power statecraft: to expand influence while constantly defending its own foundations.

To better illustrate the empirical patterns, the study summarizes its findings in a conceptual diagram. The figure below captures what we term *The Pacific Paradox*: the coexistence of expansionary strategies and defensive reflexes in Indonesia's Pacific diplomacy (Adzкия, 2025). On the one hand, Jakarta seeks to widen its influence through soft power and economic diplomacy. On the other hand, it remains firmly anchored in sovereignty defense, particularly with regard to Papua. The interplay of these two dynamics shapes a paradoxical posture that is neither wholly outward-looking nor entirely inward-focused.

Figure 1. Expansion and Defense in Indonesia's Diplomacy



Source: Primary Data

The diagram highlights how Indonesia's policy options cannot be separated from this dual logic. Initiatives such as scholarships or buying missions are designed to project goodwill, but they are simultaneously constrained by defensive calculations to prevent external actors from using Pacific platforms against Indonesia's territorial integrity. This paradox does not imply inconsistency; rather, it reveals the structural condition of a middle power navigating contested arenas. Indonesia's diplomacy in the Pacific is thus best understood not as fragmented policy, but as a deliberate balancing act—expanding presence while defending the very foundations of sovereignty.

To complement the diagram, the study also presents a comparative table that juxtaposes theoretical perspectives with the findings. This table helps clarify how Indonesia's Pacific diplomacy reflects, extends, and in some cases challenges existing scholarly debates. By systematically aligning literature with empirical evidence, the analysis demonstrates that Indonesia's case is neither a simple confirmation of theory nor a complete anomaly, but rather a nuanced interplay of realism, constructivism, and middle-power strategies.

Table 1. Interplay between theoretical perspectives and findings on Indonesia's Pacific diplomacy

Theoretical Perspective	Key Arguments in Literature	Findings	Implication
Neoclassical Realism (Rose, 1998; Schweller, 2018)	Foreign policy shaped by systemic pressures and domestic constraints.	U.S.–China rivalry interacts with Indonesia's Papua sensitivities; diplomacy is simultaneously expansionary and defensive.	Confirms realism's focus on sovereignty, but shows middle-power caution in contested arenas.
Constructivism & Identity Politics (Acharya, 2018; Reilly, 2020)	Norms, identity, and belonging shape legitimacy more than material power.	Melanesian solidarity constrains Indonesia's acceptance despite aid and scholarships.	Highlights limits of material gestures; legitimacy deficit persists without cultural recognition.
Soft Power (Nye, 2021; Wilson, 2019)	Attraction through culture, education, and ideas can shape preferences.	Scholarships and cultural diplomacy welcomed, but quickly eroded by Papua issue.	Validates critique of soft power's fragility when sovereignty disputes dominate.
Economic Diplomacy (Bayne & Woolcock, 2017; Tarte, 2019)	Trade and development reinforce political ties when institutionalized.	Buying missions, GSP schemes, blue-economy partnerships proposed, but remain fragmented.	Shows potential, but without coherence risk being seen as transactional.
Middle-Power Statecraft (Wallis et al., 2025)	Middle powers hedge, selectively engage, and act as norm entrepreneurs.	Indonesia balances expansion and defense; seeks recognition as Pacific neighbor while guarding sovereignty.	Positions Indonesia as a cautious middle power defined by paradox.

Source: Primary Data

As the table illustrates, Indonesia's diplomacy cannot be reduced to one framework. Neoclassical realism explains the defensive reflexes tied to Papua, yet constructivist insights are needed to account for the persistent legitimacy gap in Melanesian contexts. Soft power contributes to attraction but proves fragile, while economic diplomacy offers opportunities that remain underdeveloped without institutional embedding. Seen together, these perspectives converge in what we have termed *The Pacific Paradox*—a diplomacy at once expansive and defensive. For

policymakers, this suggests that future strategies must be designed with awareness of these layered dynamics rather than assuming any single model suffices.

The findings highlight Indonesia's persistent dilemma in engaging with the Pacific: it must demonstrate openness to cooperation while safeguarding sovereignty over Papua. This aligns strongly with the assumptions of neoclassical realism. Rose (1998) and Schweller (2018) remind us that foreign policy emerges from the interplay between systemic pressures and domestic constraints. The evidence from this study confirms that point. The U.S.–China rivalry sets the external stage (Hameiri & Jones, 2020), but it is Indonesia's domestic anxieties—particularly the sensitivity of Papua issue—that filter how Jakarta responds. Rather than pursuing unrestrained expansion, Indonesia's Pacific diplomacy reveals what Reilly (2020) describes as “calibrated assertion,” a strategy marked by cautious advances tempered by defensive reflexes.

Yet realism alone cannot explain the paradoxes uncovered. The persistence of skepticism toward Indonesia within the MSG underscores the enduring power of identity politics. Constructivist scholars such as Acharya (2018) argue that material incentives cannot substitute for normative legitimacy. The findings support this view: despite scholarships and development aid, MSG members continue to privilege Melanesian solidarity over Indonesia's diplomatic overtures. This suggests that foreign policy in the Pacific cannot be reduced to power balancing; it is also a contest over belonging, cultural recognition, and historical narrative. Here, constructivism complicates realism by showing that legitimacy, not just material resources, determines diplomatic outcomes. The study also engages with the literature on soft power. Nye (2021) insists that attraction is a crucial tool for states to shape preferences in international politics. Indonesia's use of scholarships, cultural diplomacy, and interfaith dialogues reflects this logic. However, Wilson (2019) cautions that soft power is fragile when confronted with entrenched political disputes. The results echo this critique: Indonesia's soft-power initiatives are welcomed in some contexts, but the Papua issue quickly erodes the credibility they are meant to build. Thus, soft power in this case functions less as a transformative tool and more as a supplementary instrument—valuable but insufficient in the absence of deeper trust.

From a policy perspective, economic diplomacy emerges as both a strength and a limitation. On the one hand, initiatives such as buying missions and the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) scheme fit the expectations of scholars who argue that trade and development cooperation can reinforce political relations (Bayne & Woolcock, 2017). On the other hand, the ad hoc and fragmented nature of Indonesia's economic outreach resonates with Scott's (2019) critique that Jakarta's Indo-Pacific discourse often remains aspirational. Without institutional embedding, economic gestures risk being perceived as transactional, reinforcing rather than dissolving skepticism (Tarte, 2020). The implication is clear: Indonesia's diplomacy in the Pacific must move beyond episodic aid toward systematic, rules-based cooperation.

At a broader level, the findings advance the debate on middle-power statecraft. Beeson and Lee-Brown (Beeson & Lee-Brown, 2017) argue that middle powers often navigate contested regions through strategies of selective engagement, hedging, and norm entrepreneurship. Indonesia's Pacific diplomacy fits this profile, though with a unique twist: its diplomacy is not only about gaining recognition but also about preventing delegitimization. This dual imperative makes

Indonesia's case instructive for both theoretical and policy audiences. It shows how a middle power can be simultaneously proactive and defensive, expansive and cautious. One might say this is the essence of Indonesia's Pacific paradox: to be present without overexposing, to be ambitious without provoking rejection.

Finally, the study also raises questions for future research. To what extent can Indonesia reframe Pacific engagement away from the prism of Papua, and toward issues of shared global concern such as climate change and disaster resilience? How can Jakarta sustain credibility in the long term if its gestures remain fragmented? These questions invite further inquiry and suggest that the interplay of realism, constructivism, and economic diplomacy will remain central to analyzing Indonesia's foreign policy.

Interpretation of Key Findings

The findings reveal that Indonesia's Pacific diplomacy embodies a paradoxical character: the simultaneous pursuit of expansion and defense. On the one hand, Jakarta promotes scholarships, cultural initiatives, and economic diplomacy as soft power diplomacy. On the other, these efforts are continually constrained by sovereignty concerns, particularly the internationalization of Papua. This dual-track posture reflects what Rose (1998) and Schweller (2018) describe as the essence of neoclassical realism—foreign policy filtered through both systemic pressures and domestic anxieties. The Pacific thus emerges as a contested space where Indonesia seeks recognition as a neighbor while guarding its territorial integrity. Nye (2021) emphasizes that attraction can shape preferences, yet Wilson (2019) warns that such power is easily eroded by political conflicts. Evidence from Indonesia supports this caution: soft power tools are welcomed, but they fail to overcome skepticism in Melanesian settings where solidarity with Papua remains strong (Dugis & Wardhani, 2023). Similarly, economic diplomacy—through buying missions or GSP schemes—offers strategic opportunities, but without institutional embedding, these efforts risk being perceived as transactional (Bayne & Woolcock, 2017; Tarte, 2020).

Comparison with Previous Studies

The results resonate with, yet also extend, existing scholarship. Scott (2019) and Laurenceson & Armstrong (2023) have argued that Indonesia's Indo-Pacific discourse remains aspirational rather than operational. This study confirms that critique by showing how fragmented initiatives limit Jakarta's credibility. At the same time, the evidence complicates realist assumptions. Acharya (2018) and Reilly (2020) stress the significance of identity politics in shaping legitimacy. The persistence of Melanesian solidarity against Indonesia, despite aid and cooperation, validates this constructivist insight.

In comparison with broader debates on middle-power statecraft, Indonesia's case fits Beeson and Lee-Brown's (2022) claim that middle powers hedge and selectively engage. Yet Indonesia's position is distinctive: rather than simply seeking recognition, it must also prevent delegitimization. This study therefore contributes to the literature by framing Indonesia's diplomacy not merely as fragmented policy but as a paradoxical balancing act—expansive in ambition, defensive in practice.

Limitations and Cautions

This research is limited by its reliance on document-based analysis. While official speeches, communiqués, and policy documents provide valuable insights, they cannot fully capture behind-the-scenes negotiations or the perceptions of Pacific stakeholders themselves. The absence of interview data with policymakers or regional actors restricts the depth of interpretation. Moreover, the temporal scope (2018–2025) may miss longer historical continuities that shape Pacific perceptions of Indonesia. Readers should therefore interpret the findings as indicative rather than exhaustive. The study provides a conceptual framework and empirical illustrations, but it does not claim to capture the full complexity of Indonesia–Pacific relations.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could expand the scope by incorporating elite interviews with Indonesian and Pacific diplomats, enabling richer insights into the motives and constraints shaping engagement. Comparative research with other middle powers, such as Australia or India, would also highlight how Indonesia's paradoxical diplomacy differs from or resembles peers in the region. Quantitative approaches—such as media content analysis or surveys of Pacific stakeholders—may complement qualitative findings and provide measurable indicators of perception. Finally, longitudinal studies that trace policy shifts across administrations would shed light on whether Indonesia's Pacific diplomacy evolves into a coherent long-term strategy or remains reactive to external pressures.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated Indonesia's diplomacy in the Pacific and aimed to analyze how Jakarta balances sovereignty concern with efforts to expand regional partnerships. The findings demonstrated that Indonesia's engagement is marked by a paradox of expansion and defense, highlighting fragmented soft-power initiatives, contested legitimacy in Melanesian forums, and emerging but under-institutionalized economic diplomacy. Notably, the study contributes a conceptual framing of “The Pacific Paradox,” showing how Indonesia simultaneously seeks recognition as a Pacific neighbor while protecting its sovereignty over Papua. These results underscore the importance of neoclassical realism in explaining Indonesia's foreign policy. It also revealing the limits of soft power and the need for institutionalized economic strategies, suggesting policy interventions that combine regulatory frameworks, trust-building initiatives, and sustained regional engagement.s

While providing valuable insights into Indonesia's Pacific diplomacy, this study still has limitations, such as its reliance on document-based analysis, the absence of primary interviews, and the restricted temporal scope of 2018–2025. Future research should focus on incorporating elite interviews, comparative studies with other middle powers, and longitudinal analysis of Indonesia's Pacific policies, potentially enhancing our understanding of how middle powers navigate contested regions and informing both policy design and theoretical development in international relations.

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