



Indonesia's Economic Potential in The South Pacific and The Urgency of Joining The South Pacific Defense Ministers Meeting Forum

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ABS TR ACT

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The South Pacific is a region that is a new arena for the struggle for hegemony by big countries in the world. This area is very strategic, both for the economic and defense sectors. Apart from France and Australia, which have long had a strong influence in the region, the United States, China, Japan and the UK have also begun to explore the South Pacific.

Even though the South Pacific is not as popular as the Southeast Asia region, Indonesia actually has interests in the region. Its geographic location is close to the South Pacific, and its similarities as an archipelagic country as well as its large economic potential and security threats encourage Indonesia to be actively involved in the region. For this reason, the Indonesian Government, through the Ministry of Defense, expressed its desire and hope that Indonesia would participate in the South Pacific Defense Ministers Meeting (SPDMM) forum.

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1. Introduction

The South Pacific Defense Ministers Meeting Forum is a meeting forum for defense ministers from countries in the South Pacific region, such as Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and other Pacific countries, including those under French rule. This forum discusses and coordinates security and defense issues in the region. This forum has been held every year since it was initiated by Australia in 2013.

The South Pacific Defense Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM) is the only ministerial level security and defense forum in the South Pacific. On the agenda: climate change and its impacts, the preparation of the armed forces in terms of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as well as the security of the exclusive maritime and economic areas of Member States. Created in 2013 on Australia's initiative, the 2023 edition – the eighth – marks the 10th anniversary of the summit



(Minister Des Armees). This summit brought together seven Member States that have armed forces: Australia, France, New Zealand, Chile, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Tonga. Three states with observation status are also present, like the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom.

The SPDMM plays an important role for security in the South Pacific. It is a forum for high-level dialogue and exchange. The Ministers of Defense deepened mutual understanding and had a joint analysis of the defense stakes in the region. These discussions also help coordinate responses to threats to Pacific communities, particularly to illegal activities, predation of fish resources, or threats related to climate change.

In 2013, the Povai Endeavor framework was proposed. The goal: define a large, well-structured exercise agenda to strengthen interoperability between partners in terms of maritime security and HADR operations. Currently, Povai Endeavor consists of four major exercises, including Croix du Sud hosted by the French armed forces in New Caledonia, and will also soon include Marara, led by the French armed forces in French Polynesia..

SPDMM and US-China competition means that the regional security landscape has changed since the founding of SPDMM. China's funding opportunities, especially within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, have increased dependency relations, weakening the economic, social and political ecosystems of PIC countries while strengthening China's influence. In September 2019, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati decided to end ties with Taiwan in favor of closer ties with Beijing. Furthermore, the signing of a security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands in March 2022 raised concerns among regional actors, particularly Australia and the United States, regarding the risks of China's military presence on the islands or the closure of its maritime space to ship transit. In June of the same year, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi embarked on an unprecedented ten-day tour of the region. However, the regional cooperation agreement that was planned to be proposed to members of the Pacific Islands Forum was rejected even before its official submission (Pajon).

In response to China's expansion in the region, the United States and its partners have begun to reinvest in the region. Washington launched its first Pacific Partnership strategy, and President Biden hosted his counterparts from Pacific Island nations at highly publicized forums in 2022 and 2023. The initiative was accompanied by the opening of embassies in the Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Kiribati, as well as in the Cook Islands and Niue, as funding for sustainable development in Oceania increases. Then Australia announced the "Pacific Step Up" in 2017, New Zealand announced the "Pacific Reset" in 2018, the UK "Pacific Uplift" in 2019, and Japan has made the Pacific islands the cornerstone of its Indo-Pacific strategy since 2018.

This renewed interest has led to an increase in security cooperation agreements in the region. The Indo-Pacific Quad, which since 2017 has brought together the United States, India, Japan and Australia, is increasingly focused on the Pacific Islands region, especially through its initiative announced in May 2022 for Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA). The aim is to build a "common operational picture" of activities at sea. On June 24, 2022, Washington announced the launch of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) initiative to coordinate the actions of international partners in support of the region. Other initiatives, such as the trilateral partnership between the United States, Australia and Japan, aim to link connectivity and critical infrastructure projects. Furthermore, in May 2023, Washington concluded an unprecedented defense cooperation agreement with PNG.

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) has watched this trend with great concern, as the renewed interest of major powers could jeopardize the PIC's approach to non-alignment, symbolized by the motto "Friends to all, no enemies". This geostrategic competition has received little response from countries concerned about the risks of sinking certain ships, looting of natural resources, the impact of climate change, and pollution. The "Blue Pacific Strategy in 2050", published in July 2022, reaffirms the PIF's central role in coordinating regional security and emphasizes the importance of Pacific Way methods, context-based, respect for privacy and non-interference in domestic affairs. Referring to the Boe Declaration on Regional Security, the "Blue Pacific Strategy in 2050" provides a coordinated response from Pacific countries.

The Nations sought to call for the establishment of a flexible and responsive regional security system, as well as an implementation process that ensures that the Pacific can address both traditional and non-traditional security challenges. Henceforth, the future of the SPDMM will depend on its

ability to maintain legitimacy and effectiveness in such a context. Its legitimacy, as perceived by the PIC countries and Chile, depends on its ability to stay away from power competition, and focus more on cross-sectoral security issues and capacity building. Australia, New Zealand and France recognized the importance of respecting the PIC's non-aligned stance. However, they argue that strengthening security cooperation with these countries also helps them take the right decisions and ultimately resist China's predation efforts. The effectiveness of the SPDMM depends on the PIC's ability to take ownership of this cooperation platform, which in turn requires respect for the traditional processes of consultation and decision-making by consensus. The current priority is to implement the decisions and recommendations adopted over the last decade.

Finally, the name SPDMM and dialogue and other security mechanisms in the region are still pending. The SPDMM does not maintain a direct, structured relationship with the PIF, which remains the dominant regional institution in terms of security and policy in the region, nor with the Joint Chiefs of Pacific Security (JHOPS) established by Australia in 2019. The JHOPS addresses similar topics as the SPDMM, which involving the armed forces as well as regional police, customs and immigration agencies. Additionally, there is potential for convergence between the FRANZ framework, whose extension to specific PICs has been discussed, and the SPDMM, which in practice, brings together the PICs best prepared to provide assistance to other countries in the region when needed. Additionally, on another note, opportunities to expand the Povai Endeavor framework have been discussed to incorporate the Longreach TTX exercise and the Croix du Sud/Marara operational exercise as a training and certification pathway for PICs. The consolidation of dialogue and cooperation initiatives, however, needs to be built on strong relationships of trust between partners, so that each party can benefit from this approach, whether in terms of efficiency, visibility or influence.

Meanwhile, New Zealand will host the ninth annual SPDMM meeting in 2024, with the date and location to be confirmed. SPDMM involves Defense Ministers from Papua New Guinea, Fiji, France, Tonga, Chile, Australia and New Zealand. Apart from that, there is the possibility of adding a new country, namely Indonesia, to join, although not as a permanent member.

Global political dynamics encourage Indonesia to pay attention to the South Pacific Region. For this reason, the Ministry of Defense needs to carry out various analyzes and discussions on the urgency and steps to play a role in the South Pacific region through SPDMM. Of course, there are other forums besides SPDMM, but as a defense institution, the Ministry of Defense encourages Indonesia's role in the region starting from the defense sector.

There are several reasons why it is important for Indonesia to pay attention to the South Pacific as a strategic region. The first is the existence of natural resources. The South Pacific is rich in natural resources, such as oil, natural gas and fish. Indonesia's presence in this area is important to protect the country's economic and security interests, especially in terms of managing and monitoring these natural resources.

Second, strategic trade routes. The South Pacific is a strategic trade route that connects the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean. Indonesia's defense interests in this area are to ensure the security and smooth movement of ships passing through the area, both for trade and military reasons.

Then, Indonesia's presence as a maritime country. As the largest archipelagic country in the world, Indonesia has an interest in maintaining the security and stability of its territory and surrounding waters, including the South Pacific. By strengthening its presence in this area, Indonesia can ensure the security and sovereignty of its maritime territory.

2. Literature Review

Furthermore, regional partnerships and cooperation. The South Pacific is an important area for regional cooperation, both in terms of security, politics and economics. Indonesia's presence in this area allows our country to increase partnerships and cooperation with countries in the South Pacific, such as Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Island countries.

Lastly, geopolitical influence. The South Pacific is an area that is the focus of geopolitical influence and global interests, especially with the power competition between large countries in the region, such as China and the United States. Indonesia's presence in this area allows our country to

maintain stability and balance these forces, as well as maintain Indonesia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Thus, through the SPDMM forum, which is a meeting forum for defense ministers from countries in the South Pacific region who discuss and coordinate security and defense issues in the region. This meeting is usually held every year and is attended by the minister of defense and representatives of member countries of the Islands Forum Pacific. Topics discussed include defense cooperation, overcoming security threats, peacekeeping missions, maritime protection, and so on.

3. Method

In this research, the method used is a qualitative descriptive method. This type of qualitative descriptive research displays data as it is without manipulation or other treatments. The aim of this research is to present a complete picture of an event or is intended to expose and clarify a phenomenon that occurs. In this qualitative method, the author becomes the instrument in the research and analysis is carried out continuously from the beginning of the research. The author also uses secondary data to analyze various economic policies and potential and their development.

4. Results and Discussion

Indonesia's Economic Potential in the South Pacific

The former Indonesian Ambassador to New Zealand, Samoa, the Kingdom of Tonga, the Cook Islands and Niue, who also serves as the Indonesian Roving Ambassador to the Pacific, Tantowi Yahya in 2021, said that Indonesia views the Pacific region as important. He conveyed this at an academic meeting organized by the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs (NZIIA).

On this occasion there were representatives from the Kingdom of Tonga, the Cook Islands, New Zealand, a number of academics, students, observers, politicians and diplomats in Wellington, New Zealand. Tantowi discussed Indonesia's priorities for the Pacific region. He explained an explanation of Indonesia's relations with the Pacific from a geographical, historical, social and cultural perspective. Indonesia is part of the Pacific, therefore it is natural that Indonesia wants to participate in the dynamics that occur in that region.

He also expressed Indonesia's desire to improve relations and economic cooperation as well as increase human resource capacity. The Pacific is a potential market for Indonesian products and an investment destination for Indonesian investors. Meanwhile, Indonesia is also a big market for Pacific products.

Indonesia also holds the largest and most comprehensive trade, investment and tourism exhibition, the Pacific Exposition to open the market. This activity is carried out every two years and is concrete evidence of Indonesia's assistance to countries in the Pacific.

The Pacific Elevation program, which is a refinement of the previously implemented Pacific Engagement, was launched by the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi in Auckland, New Zealand in July 2019. Foreign Minister Retno said this program was not to compete, but wanted to complement it. Through this program, Indonesia is committed to assisting economic development with the aim of improving the welfare of people in the Pacific (KBRI Wellington).

Regional and Global Challenges and Threats in the South Pacific

Indonesia's foreign policy in the South Pacific has undergone significant changes along with increased attention to ethnic Melanesian people in Indonesian diplomacy. The South Pacific is of strategic importance in the global geopolitical and economic context, and Indonesia has adopted a more focused approach to this region, especially in its relations with Melanesian countries. The Melanesian ethnic factor is a major consideration in shaping Indonesia's foreign policy in this region. Indonesia's foreign policy in the South Pacific reflects efforts to strengthen political, economic and social cooperation with Melanesian countries. Apart from that, Indonesia is also committed to supporting sustainable development and welfare of the Melanesian people. This is reflected in the various bilateral and regional cooperation initiatives and projects that Indonesia has taken in this region.

The South Pacific is an area that is a field for contestation by several large powers, both from within and outside the region. Outside the region, Wallis (2017) states that there are eight countries that are external powers, both old and new in the South Pacific, namely the United States, France, China, Japan, Russia, India, Taiwan and Indonesia. Specifically, this article will look at Indonesia's share in the Oceania region, which has been proven to have increased in recent times.

Indonesia's involvement in the South Pacific region has been a priority for the Indonesian government since the era of President Suharto's leadership, especially in the 1980s. This is proven by the Decree of the People's Consultative Assembly (TAP MPR) in 1973, 1978 and 1983 concerning the Outline of State Policy (GBHN) which emphasized the importance of maintaining the stability of the Southeast Asia and South Pacific region (Usman, 1994). Apart from that, Leifer (1983) added that the concentric circles in the implementation of Indonesia's foreign policy also included the South Pacific region as one of the key areas to be considered.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs in the New Order era of 1978–1988, Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, said that Indonesia should pay more attention to regional politics in the South Pacific. Usman (1994) also added that after the death of Mochtar Kusumaatmadja from the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali Alatas as his successor further strengthened Indonesia's position in the South Pacific. The step taken by Alatas is to continue to make the South Pacific one of the main priorities on Indonesia's foreign policy agenda. Indonesia's presence in the South Pacific is a shift in diplomatic focus after a long period of building closeness with Southeast Asia and the western bloc (Usman, 1994). This is an important step to build trust and a relationship between the two parties that is closer and mutually beneficial to each other.

The relationship between Indonesia and the South Pacific is based on the similarities between the two of them, which are archipelagic countries and the influence of the sea's very essential role in the national and state life of both parties. The sovereignty and territorial integrity of Indonesia and the South Pacific depend closely on maritime sovereignty, so the ratification of the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea 1982 or UNCLOS 1982 is good news for both of them (Usman, 1994). However, relations between Indonesia and the South Pacific before the collapse of the New Order did not develop in a more substantive direction. This is proven by Indonesia's diplomatic relations with various countries in the South Pacific which are still relatively symbolic. Usman (1994) also added that various Indonesian diplomatic missions in South Pacific countries, such as Fiji, at that time were still focused only on New Zealand, which indicated the complete stagnation of Indonesia-Oceania relations.

After years of putting aside relations between Indonesia and the South Pacific, the era of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi)'s leadership was the beginning of the return of the Indonesian government's foreign policy priorities in the South Pacific. Wallis (2017) stated that Indonesia's position in the South Pacific was reaffirmed through various government policies through the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi. One of them is by positioning Indonesia as one of the countries in the Melanesian sub-region, because Indonesia is home to 11 million Melanesian people spread across five provinces in central and eastern Indonesia, namely East Nusa Tenggara, Maluku, North Maluku, Papua, and West Papua.

On this basis, Indonesia became an associate member of one of the South Pacific sub-regional organizations, namely the Melanesian Spearhead Group in 2015 thanks to the support of Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Currently, Indonesia—with the full support of Fiji and Papua New Guinea—is pushing for status renewal to become a full member of the Melanesian Spearhead Group, but this desire has been rejected by Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands on the basis of solidarity with the Free Papua Organization (Radio New Zealand, 2016). It is known that the Republic of Vanuatu is one of the parties that often raises the issue of human rights violations and encourages freedom for self-determination for the people of Papua in international forums (CNBC Indonesia).

Strengthening Relationships to Achieve Interests

As a form of President Jokowi's commitment to the South Pacific region, various forms of economic assistance have been provided to South Pacific countries. One of them is aid of five million United States dollars to Fiji for recovery after being hit by a cyclone natural disaster (Radio New Zealand, 2016). Providing economic assistance to South Pacific countries is one of the various examples of implementing Indonesia's Look East Policy.

Wardhani and Dugis (2020) stated that the implementation of Indonesia's Look East Policy is one of the steps to safeguard Indonesia's territorial integrity, especially regarding the issue of separatism in Papua. Apart from that, Indonesia's aggressive actions in providing assistance to South Pacific countries are proof of Indonesia's commitment to cooperation between Global South countries.

Based on the review above, the author has the view that Indonesia's increasing involvement in the South Pacific is a step in strengthening Indonesia's position as an actor that has close relations with the South Pacific region. President Jokowi's foreign policy direction, which usually does not prioritize prestige in the international order, is different this time when looking at the South Pacific context. The increasing focus of Indonesia's foreign policy on the South Pacific can be attributed to President Jokowi's desire for Indonesia to be more closely tied to the Indo-Pacific region (Rosyidin, 2017). Indonesia's closeness to this region can also be seen when the Prime Minister of Fiji, Frank Bainimarama, as Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum was invited to the G20 Summit in Bali in November 2022. Indonesia's relations with South Pacific countries can be interpreted as a reciprocal relationship, especially in the context of economic relations, the MSME sector, and identity as fellow Pacific countries.

The Ministry of Trade is trying to strengthen exports, especially to countries in the Pacific region. Trade missions were also carried out to open new market opportunities. Director General of National Export Development Arlinda said the trade mission was carried out in New Zealand on 9-14 July 2019. This country in the Pacific region is a potential trading partner for Indonesia. Strengthening export markets through increasing cooperation in encouraging the flow of traffic of people, goods and services, as well as connectivity between Eastern Indonesia and the Pacific.

In this trade mission, the Ministry of Trade facilitated 30 companies operating in the food and beverage, electronics and financial services sectors. Apart from that, other strategic industries such as energy and automotive products in the country are also being promoted. This trade mission is an opportunity for Indonesian entrepreneurs to build business networks abroad by exploring trade agreements. Exhibition facilities were also strengthened by holding The 1st Pacific Exposition on 12-14 July 2019.

At least 50 companies from countries in the Pacific region participated in the tourism, trade, investment and cultural exhibition. This activity is also a form of economic diplomacy supporting Indonesia for South Pacific countries. The 1st Pacific Exposition activity was an initiation of the Indonesian Embassy in Wellington, New Zealand. Through this activity, it is hoped that it can increase Indonesia's presence and role as part of the Pacific region, encourage an integrated Pacific market, and introduce the potential of countries in the Pacific region. One third of Indonesia's territory is located in the Pacific Ocean, making this region a family for Indonesia.

Apart from the Ministry of Trade, the exhibition was attended by representatives from the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of BUMN. The Indonesian booth displays superior products from Eastern Indonesia represented by five provinces, namely Papua, West Papua, Maluku, North Maluku and East Nusa Tenggara. This activity is targeted to generate potential transactions between Indonesia and Pacific countries. The presence of strategic industries from Indonesia, accompanied by the cooperation of the Indonesian Embassy in Wellington, the Canberra Trade Attaché and the Indonesian Trade Promotion Center (ITPC) Sydney to present potential buyers and invite relevant government parties in the Pacific region, can increase transaction potential.

Total trade between Indonesia and countries in the Pacific region in 2018 was recorded at USD 10.67 billion. This figure increased 3.05 percent compared to the previous year which was recorded at USD 10.37 billion. In the January-March 2019 period, Indonesia's total trade with the Pacific region was recorded at USD 2.04 billion. The largest destination countries for Indonesian exports to the Pacific region are Australia, New Zealand, East Timor, Papua New Guinea and Fiji. Indonesia's main export products to the Pacific region are electronic components, palm oil, tires and tobacco. Meanwhile, Indonesia's imports from the Pacific region are bituminous coal, livestock products, wheat, iron ore concentrate and raw sugar (Saw).

5. Conclusion

Indonesia's desire to join the SPDMM forum is a strategic step to strengthen Indonesia's position in the South Pacific. There are many interests that form the basis of Indonesia's attitude to shift its attention to this region. Apart from security and defense factors, there is huge economic potential for Indonesia to develop both through trade and the abundant natural resources in this zone.

The greatest economic potential is marine resources in Indonesian waters adjacent to this zone. Many areas of Indonesian waters near the South Pacific have not yet been explored, so by strengthening relations with Pacific countries, Indonesia will not only protect its natural resources but can also strengthen economic cooperation in the future.

However, to be able to join SPDMM you have to go through quite a long process. Since submitting a desire to join the forum in 2023, Indonesia will only be able to participate in 2024 as a non-member country. Indonesia's membership requires an intense approach with a number of other member countries

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