

## ASEAN Defense Diplomacy Through AHA Centre as an Effort for Humanitarian Assistance

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### ARTICLE INFO

*Keywords:* AHA Centre, ASEAN, Defense Diplomacy, Humanitarian Assistance

*Received :* 2 June

*Revised :* 15 July

*Accepted:* 28 August

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### ABSTRACT

This research analyzes ASEAN defense diplomacy through the ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre) in response to humanitarian assistance. ASEAN plays an important role in dealing with natural disasters in Southeast Asia, so it is necessary to increase coordination and disaster response through effective mechanisms. The research method involves observation and literature study by focus on assessing the involvement of ASEAN member countries in humanitarian aid operations coordinated by the AHA Centre, and analyzes official documents, reports, scientific articles, and publications related to defense diplomacy and disaster management in ASEAN. The research stages include identifying the role and function of the AHA Centre, analyzing disaster response cases, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of coordination and cooperation between ASEAN member countries. The research results show that defense diplomacy in ASEAN has successfully strengthened cooperation and solidarity among member states through various mechanisms such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus. The AHA Centre has also demonstrated its role in enhancing preparedness and response to disasters through programs such as ASEAN-ERAT and the ACE Programme, as well as the importance of regional collaboration to achieve effective security and humanitarian responses in Southeast Asia

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed on August 8, 1967, as a regional organization facilitating cooperation among Southeast Asian countries. As stated in the ASEAN Declaration, the organization's objectives align with the aspirations for the Southeast Asian region. ASEAN's main objectives is to collectively enhance economic growth, social progress, and cultural development through collaborative efforts based on equality and partnership. These objectives extend beyond economics, encompassing a broader vision of establishing a prosperous and peaceful Southeast Asian community. ASEAN's mission is to promote regional peace and stability, underscored by a dedication to justice, the rule of law, and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter. Additionally, ASEAN aims to promote active cooperation and mutual assistance among its member countries in various areas, including economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific, and administrative areas. This cooperation involves mutual support and assistance, including in training, research facilities, and expertise exchanges. ASEAN is committed to enhancing critical sectors for economic development, including agriculture, industry, and trade, with a focus on improving infrastructure and facilitating international trade. Simultaneously, ASEAN promotes studies and understanding of Southeast Asian dynamics and maintains cooperative relations with international and regional organizations with similar objectives. These collective goals affirm ASEAN's commitment to advancing peace, stability, and prosperity in the region through coordinated and collaborative efforts among its member countries and with external partners (Liwe, 2018).

Currently, the emergence of security challenges in Southeast Asia has prompted the governments of ASEAN member countries to create a dedicated platform to address these issues. This forum, known as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), was established to facilitate dialogue among the Defense Ministers and Foreign Ministers of ASEAN countries. Specifically, during the inaugural ADMM in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on May 9, 2006, a new concept called "defense diplomacy" was introduced, marking a significant development in ASEAN's defense cooperation efforts (Pedrason, 2015). Besides ADMM, there is also ADMM-Plus, which serves as a platform for ASEAN and its eight Dialogue Partners, which are Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States, to enhance security and defense cooperation for peace, stability, and development in the region. Defense diplomacy in ASEAN refers to the strategic use of military and defense resources by member countries to promote mutual trust and cooperation. This concept is crucial in the ASEAN context, where defense diplomacy is used to achieve various objectives, including enhancing national and international security, reducing the potential for conflict, and promoting regional stability. Defense diplomacy can also be defined as the use of diplomatic tools and strategies to advance a country's defense and security interests, serving three main functions: confidence-building measures, capacity building, and the defense industry (Laksmiana, 2012). Additionally, in defense diplomacy discussions, countries are not limited to traditional security issues, but can also

collaborate on non-traditional security issues, such as natural disasters. This is evident from one of the focus areas of practical cooperation discussed at the 10th ADMM-Plus in 2023, which included Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (Kementerian Pertahanan Republik Indonesia, 2023)

Geographically, Indonesia is located around the Ring of Fire, a term indicating regions in Indonesia prone to disasters. Frequently, the potential disasters in this area are diverse, including volcanic eruptions, floods, fires, landslides, tsunamis, coastal erosion, and earthquakes (Adiansyah & Matrani, 2021). Additionally, natural disasters are also a concern for countries in Southeast Asia, as it is one of the world's most disaster-prone regions (Hidayatullah, 2023). In response, ASEAN, a regional organization in Southeast Asia, founded the AHA Centre (ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance) in 2011. The purpose of the AHA Centre is to enhance cooperation and coordination among ASEAN member states, the United Nations, and other relevant international organizations to foster regional collaboration in disaster management (The AHA Centre, n.d.). The AHA Centre typically categorizes its activities into disaster monitoring, preparedness and response, and capacity building. Moreover, to develop a disaster-resilient region, the AHA Centre assists National Disaster Management Organizations in ASEAN member countries by enhancing their capacities. Natural disasters have become a collective challenge for ASEAN member countries, and disaster management cannot be handled by one party alone. Nations must cooperate because natural disasters can trigger humanitarian crises and require global solidarity to address these humanitarian issues (Rahmat et al., 2024). Therefore, this study aims to determine the extent of the role of defense diplomacy as an effort for ASEAN's humanitarian assistance response and the establishment of the AHA Centre.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Defense Diplomacy

The term "defense diplomacy" is closely related to the changing understanding of international security and national security policy after the Cold War. On one hand, this period is marked by a decrease in militarization in international relations, and on the other hand, there is a broader view of the role of armed forces, which goes beyond offensive, defensive, or deterrent roles. It is described as the practice of negotiating that uses means, methods, and instruments that do not escalate hostility and is applied under international law (Drab, 2018). Defense diplomacy refers to the peaceful application of a nation's defense resources to accomplish its strategic objectives through cooperation with other countries. This term encompasses a range of activities, including officer exchanges, ship visits, training missions, and joint military exercises, all of which are viewed as practices of defense diplomacy (Winger, 2014).

In ASEAN, defense diplomacy is implemented through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus, which promote cooperation and dialogue on security matters. This strategy represents a broader view of defense diplomacy as a peaceful method for achieving strategic objectives through international cooperation. It encompasses activities like joint

military exercises, exchanges of personnel, and collaboration in humanitarian assistance and disaster management. The AHA Centre is a concrete example of this, as it coordinates disaster response efforts and strengthens regional and international partnerships to address natural disasters. By leveraging defense diplomacy, ASEAN enhances its ability to tackle security and natural disaster challenges collaboratively, reinforcing its commitment to regional peace and stability.

### **Liberal Institutional**

According to Robert Keohane, liberal institutional theory is an International Relations theory that claims institutions, regimes, and international organizations, whether global or regional, can enhance and facilitate cooperation among countries. These institutions or international organizations, or a set of rules, can regulate the actions of a country in various specific fields (Robert Jackson; Georg Serensen, 2014). Liberal institutionalism argues that emphasis should be placed on international governance and organizations as a way to explain international relations, particularly to make countries cooperate (Baylis et al., 2019).

This aligns with ASEAN's role in facilitating regional cooperation in Southeast Asia. ASEAN seeks to boost economic growth, social advancement, and cultural development through collaborative efforts grounded in partnership and equality. To enhance security and defense cooperation in the region, ASEAN created the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the ADMM-Plus framework. These forums allow for dialogue and cooperation among defense ministers and ASEAN dialogue partners in addressing security challenges, including defense diplomacy that involves efforts to build trust and collaboration in addressing non-traditional threats. Additionally, in dealing with natural disasters that frequently occur in the Southeast Asian region, ASEAN established the AHA Centre, which functions to coordinate disaster response and enhance disaster management capacities. Through initiatives such as One ASEAN One Response, ASEAN demonstrates its commitment to collectively and coordinately respond to disasters, reflecting liberal institutional principles in strengthening international cooperation for common welfare.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The research method used in this study employs a qualitative approach with techniques of observation and literature review. A non-participant observation method is used, where the observer does not directly engage in the activities being observed, but rather watches from a distance to collect objective data. Additionally, the researchers analyze publications, articles available on the internet, scientific publication portals, and websites in the literature review. The researchers also examine official documents and reports related to defense diplomacy in the context of humanitarian assistance. This method enables the researcher to acquire a thorough and detailed insight into the subject being examined.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Defense Diplomacy in the ASEAN Context**

Defense Diplomacy is an effort made by a country to build and maintain good relations with other countries through the use of military and security instruments. Defense diplomacy can also be defined as the use of diplomatic tools and military engagement to encourage cooperation, build relationships, and reduce conflict in the global security domain (Sarjito & Perwita, 2024). Therefore, defense diplomacy can be interpreted as a special branch of diplomacy that focuses on national defense and security issues. This diplomacy aims to advance and protect a country's national interests in the context of security. Defense diplomacy can include various activities such as joint military exercises, military personnel exchanges, security dialogues, and cooperation in the defense industry.

In the context of ASEAN, defense diplomacy is very important to maintain regional stability and security. As a regional organization of the Southeast Asian region consisting of ten countries, ASEAN is committed to increasing cooperation and solidarity among its members. Through defense diplomacy in ASEAN, it will help increase trust between member countries, overcome non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, drug smuggling, transnational crime, and natural disasters, and increase military interoperability among member countries. ASEAN's important role in strengthening regional solidarity and security can be seen through various ASEAN mechanisms, some of which can be seen in the following table:

Table 1. Examples of Defense Diplomacy in ASEAN

No	Activity	Result
1	ADMM (ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting) is an annual meeting forum for ASEAN defense ministers aimed at strengthening defense cooperation and discussing regional security issues.	Development of initiatives such as the "Our Eyes Initiative" to share intelligence in countering terrorism and other security threats.
2	ADMM-Plus, which is an expansion of ADMM involving eight partner countries (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, and the United States).	Joint military exercises, cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster management, and maritime security.
3	ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is a dialogue platform covering 27 countries to discuss security and cooperation issues.	Disaster management and maritime security exercises, and development of conflict prevention mechanisms.
4	ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) is one of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community, which aims to create a peaceful, secure, and a stable region through increased political and security cooperation among its member countries	Establishment of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) and implementation of ASEAN Regional Disaster Emergency Response Simulation Exercise (ARDEX)

Through several mechanisms above, it can be seen that Defense Diplomacy is also implemented in humanitarian action and disaster management. Defense diplomacy in ASEAN includes cooperation in humanitarian action and disaster management through the AHA Center by facilitating coordination of humanitarian assistance and disaster management in the region, conducting several joint military exercises that also focus on disaster management operations, and cooperating across borders on humanitarian assistance and evacuation of disaster victims. Regional cooperation is very important for dealing with natural disasters in Southeast Asia because of its geographical location which is vulnerable to natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and typhoons. Based on the 2023 World Risk Index (WRI) report with various indicators such as exposure, vulnerability, susceptibility, lack of coping capacities, lack of adaptive capacities, Asia is ranked second as the region with the highest risk with an average WRI value of 4.97, far above the global risk average (Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft / IFHV, 2023). Within Asia itself, the Southeast Asia region then became the region with the highest risk with an average WRI value of 14.04, as can be seen in the following figure:

	WRI	Exposure	Vulnerability	Susceptibility	Lack of Coping Capacities	Lack of Adaptive Capacities
<b>Africa</b>	<b>4.39</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>30.53</b>	<b>30.4</b>	<b>14.68</b>	<b>59.83</b>
Central Africa	4.52	0.86	51.44	34.66	58.41	59.29
East Africa	3.93	0.55	32.96	33.59	15.08	61.31
North Africa	10.12	3.91	32.88	17.59	48.09	46.12
South Africa	1.97	0.14	26.7	23.92	12.83	51.41
West Africa	2.99	0.44	28.61	31.19	13.48	62.46
<b>The Americas</b>	<b>9.67</b>	<b>4.29</b>	<b>20.23</b>	<b>21.14</b>	<b>11.29</b>	<b>45.75</b>
Caribbean	3.01	0.79	13.41	9.19	8.49	41.57
Central America	15.64	9.36	27.03	31.75	12.22	50.46
North America	20.82	32.74	13.48	10.73	6.78	34.01
South America	13.77	8.96	25.33	26.68	12.47	47.02
<b>Asia</b>	<b>4.97</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>21.88</b>	<b>14.75</b>	<b>12.6</b>	<b>44.39</b>
Central Asia	2.15	0.22	18.43	15.1	10.92	41.72
East Asia	12.75	9.96	11.79	14.11	11.54	23.43
South Asia	5.92	1.6	31.12	27.73	55.86	45.75
<b>Southeast Asia</b>	<b>14.04</b>	<b>8.64</b>	<b>22.83</b>	<b>16.01</b>	<b>13.65</b>	<b>46.38</b>
West Asia	3.86	1.02	18.62	12.63	16.37	41.34
<b>Europe</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>0.49</b>	<b>9.28</b>	<b>6.97</b>	<b>5.55</b>	<b>35.42</b>
Eastern Europe	1.87	0.21	14.05	8.4	8.67	39.7
Northern Europe	2.52	0.72	7.59	6.41	2.19	27.6
Southern Europe	2.88	0.59	11.89	8.23	7.29	35.7
Western Europe	1.15	0.17	7.75	5.6	3.21	28.91
<b>Oceania</b>	<b>4.07</b>	<b>1.23</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>9.77</b>	<b>10.96</b>	<b>39.27</b>
Australia / New Zealand	17.79	24.6	12.92	7.37	10.32	30.28
Melanesia	12.86	7.71	21.66	17.18	12.19	52.98
Micronesia	2.69	0.5	13.53	9.79	5.44	45.2
Polynesia	2.94	0.81	10.67	9.56	11.02	29.2
<b>World</b>	<b>4.13</b>	<b>1.05</b>	<b>20.23</b>	<b>14.97</b>	<b>11.88</b>	<b>45.94</b>

Figure 1. World Risk Index 2023

Due to the vulnerability of the region, it is important for ASEAN to conduct effective defense diplomacy, so as to strengthen solidarity and security in the region and enhance collective capabilities in facing various challenges, including natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis. ASEAN countries can share resources and expertise for disaster management through regional cooperation and enable a faster and more coordinated response. By conducting joint exercises and exchanging knowledge, ASEAN countries can also improve their capabilities in disaster management. As a Southeast Asian regional organization, it is important to then also see the comparison of the organization with regions other than Southeast Asia. If compared to NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), for example, NATO is a political and military alliance founded in 1949, which primarily aims for collective defense and crisis management among its member countries from North America and Europe. Under a centralized command structure, this organization makes decisions by consensus among member countries and executes military operations through a unified command. This structure allows NATO to respond quickly to threats, as exemplified by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which stipulates that an attack on one member is considered an attack on all members, thus requiring a collective military response (NATO, n.d.). NATO emphasizes military readiness and diplomatic efforts. While it is ready to engage in military operations if diplomatic resolution fails, its primary focus is on preventing conflict through dialogue and cooperation between member states. This dual approach allows NATO to build trust and coordinate defense strategies effectively, promoting democratic values and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region. On the other hand, the European Union (EU), as an intergovernmental organization of European member states, has

strong defense cooperation through the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), including peacekeeping missions and military operations, which allows the EU to engage in military and civilian missions aimed at maintaining peace and enhancing international security. The EU also has Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) which began in 2017, which allows EU member states to collaborate more closely on defense initiatives, enhance military capabilities, and promote integration among national armed forces. This cooperation is designed to enhance the EU's strategic autonomy and is linked to various defense initiatives, including the European Defense Fund (EDF) (European Union Websites, 2021).

Meanwhile, ASEAN operates on the principle of consensus and voluntary cooperation among its member states. ASEAN's priorities are diplomatic engagement and non-interference in the internal affairs of its member states. ASEAN emphasizes regional stability over military alignments, and encourages dialogue and collaboration through various forums and initiatives. The decision-making process in ASEAN lacks centralized command and emphasizes mutual respect and consensus building. This approach allows member states to address regional issues collectively but can also result in slower responses to crises due to the need for agreement among all members. NATO, the European Union, and ASEAN all have different approaches to international cooperation and security, reflecting the historical context and operational framework that make each unique.

#### **AHA Center as a Humanitarian Effort**

To address the significant challenges posed by natural disasters in the region, ASEAN, a regional organization in Southeast Asia, officially established an intergovernmental organization known as the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre). This was achieved through an agreement signed by ASEAN Foreign Ministers at the 19th ASEAN Summit in Bali on 17 November 2011. The AHA Centre was created to enhance cooperation and coordination among ASEAN member states, the UN, and other relevant international organizations to promote regional collaboration in disaster management (The AHA Centre, n.d.). The AHA Centre categorizes its activities into Disaster Monitoring, Preparedness and Response, and Capacity Building. Furthermore, to promote a disaster-resilient region, the AHA Centre aids National Disaster Management Organizations within the ASEAN Member States through capacity-building initiatives.

AHA Centre has several important programs in an effort to improve the capacity and coordination of disaster management in the ASEAN region. There are two flagship programs in the ASEAN region, namely ASEAN-ERAT and the ACE Program. ASEAN through the AHA Centre is expected to become an effective coordination center in disaster response, confidence building (CBMs), and building national and regional capacity in dealing with disasters. The two main programs run by the AHA Centre are the ACE programmer (AHA Centre Executive Programmer) which is an intensive training program aimed at middle-level managers from National Disaster Management Offices (NDMOs) in ASEAN countries. This program aims to create a new generation of leaders in

disaster management by improving the knowledge, skills, and behavior of participants as humanitarian experts and multi-stakeholder collaborators. The ACE curriculum includes training in communication, coordination with government officials, and disaster response, including in the context of armed conflict. Meanwhile, the ASEAN-ERAT (ASEAN Emergency Response and Assessment Team) program is a team formed to provide emergency assistance and assess the situation when a disaster occurs. This team is tasked with coordinating a rapid response to disasters in ASEAN member countries, as well as conducting initial assessments to determine the need for assistance. ASEAN-ERAT plays an important role in strengthening cooperation between member countries in dealing with emergency situations. Through these two programs, the AHA Center reflects its commitment to improving disaster preparedness and response in the ASEAN region. In addition to having its own programs, the AHA Center also partners with several international organizations and countries, such as Australia, the United States, the European Union, China, Germany, New Zealand, Switzerland, and Japan. Japan itself strengthens its partnership with the AHA Center through agreements with the Asian Disaster Reduction Center (ADRC) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). This collaboration focuses on disaster risk reduction, emergency response, and capacity building for ASEAN experts (Thuzar, 2015). Through One ASEAN One Response initiative as a commitment of ASEAN member countries to collectively respond to disasters, both regionally and globally, this framework aims to streamline cooperation and resource mobilization during emergencies, ensuring that ASEAN responds as one.

In several cases of disasters that occurred in Southeast Asia in recent years, the AHA Centre has played a significant role in responding and managing them. Some examples of the disasters in question can be seen in the table below:

Table 2. Examples of AHA Center Responses in Humanitarian Assistance

No	Time	Description
1	2018	Typhoon Mangkut in Southeast Asian countries, especially the Philippines. AHA Center coordinated the regional response and facilitated the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the affected areas.
2	2018	Earthquake and Tsunami in Central Sulawesi, AHA Center mobilized resources and coordinated with ASEAN member states to provide emergency assistance and support recovery efforts.
3	2020-2021	AHA Center also adjusted its operations to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, coordinating efforts among ASEAN member states to manage the health crisis and ensure the delivery of essential supplies and support.

The examples above illustrate the AHA Centre's commitment to enhancing disaster preparedness and response capabilities in the ASEAN region, demonstrating its important role in facilitating cooperation among member countries during emergencies.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION**

ASEAN, as a regional organization of Southeast Asia, has a strong goal and commitment to advance peace, stability, and prosperity in the region through collaborative efforts and defense diplomacy. Through the ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus, ASEAN has succeeded in creating a platform to strengthen defense and security cooperation among member countries and their dialogue partners. Defense diplomacy carried out by ASEAN includes various activities such as joint military exercises, exchanges of military personnel, and cooperation in humanitarian action and disaster management.

In the context of disaster management, ASEAN created the AHA Centre to enhance collaboration and coordination in managing disasters within the region. The AHA Centre plays an important role in improving disaster preparedness and response through various programs such as ASEAN-ERAT and ACE Programme, as well as establishing partnerships with various international organizations. Through One ASEAN One Response initiative, ASEAN demonstrates its commitment to respond to disasters collectively and in a coordinated manner. Overall, defense diplomacy and cooperation in disaster management are integral parts of ASEAN's strategy to address security challenges and natural disasters, as well as strengthen solidarity and security in the region.

To be more effective in addressing the challenges of natural disasters and enhancing solidarity and security in the Southeast Asian region, the AHA Centre must continue to improve the coordination and communication mechanisms between ASEAN member states and the AHA Centre, including the use of more sophisticated information technology for disaster monitoring and rapid response. In addition to ASEAN, it is also necessary to increase cooperation with international organizations and partner countries outside ASEAN, in order to obtain additional support in the form of funds, resources, and technical expertise. In addition, it is necessary to raise public awareness of the importance of disaster preparedness and encourage community participation in disaster preparedness and response programs, as well as conduct educational campaigns and evacuation drills that can help communities be more prepared for disasters.

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