



Quantitative Assessment of the Evolution of Indonesia International Military Cooperation with the United States and China (1995 – 2014)

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Abstract

The dynamics of the rivalry between China and the United States have significantly affected many countries, with both seeking to align other states with them. Both the United States and China seek to increase their influence amid geopolitical competition, including military cooperation with Indonesia. Following the question of how these two relationships have developed over time, we present a quantitative analysis of the evolution, trend, and variations of international military cooperation with both China and the United States. With that in mind, this study developed an original index, the International Military Cooperation Intensity (IMCI) Index, to measure military cooperation between Indonesia and the two countries from 1995 to 2014 in the areas of arms transfers and bilateral joint military exercises. The findings from the IMCI Index show that while Indonesia has increasingly strengthened its military cooperation with the United States, it has simultaneously strengthened its relationship with China. While our findings confirm the assumption that the United States remains Indonesia's stronger partner, they also show Indonesia's increasing military cooperation with China during this period. This result, using these two quantitative indicators, increases our understanding of Indonesia's evolving military cooperation with both countries during this period. In addition, the methodological approach used in this study demonstrated the usefulness of constructing an index to show trends, evolution, and variation in examining international relations events such as international military cooperation.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's relations with China and the United States have attracted the attention of the academic, political, and societal communities. The rise of China has invigorated debates on the changing distribution of power in the international system, especially its implications for countries in the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, the rise of China, often referred to as the great power competition of the 21st century, has led to unease and discomfort in the United States, which has sought to contain the rising dragon (Xuetong, 2019). Indonesia, positioned in a strategic area of this rivalry, faces pressure to align with either side.

According to Montratama & Yani (2017a), rather than aligning completely with either country, Indonesia's strategy is to cooperate with both in different priority areas. According to several authors, Indonesia is prioritizing military cooperation with the United States and maintaining close economic ties with China as part of its strategy to respond to this great-power competition (Haacke, 2019; Kuik, 2016; Yani, 2021a). On the military side, the United States remains Indonesia's largest partner in education, training, joint exercises, aid, and arms procurement, compared with China (Laksmana, 2021). In the economic sector, Indonesia has been known as one of the largest recipients of Chinese investment, with approximately USD 49.37 billion since 2005 (AEI, n.d.).

Despite these claims of prioritization, other authors have argued that Indonesia has sought to diversify its military cooperation beyond the U.S, including by increasing cooperation with China (Inkiriwang, 2021a, 2021b). Indonesia's military ties with the US stretch back to the early New Order. For most of the Suharto era, the archipelago was quietly aligned with the U.S during the Cold War (Laksmana et al., 2020). However, the relationship was damaged by the U.S suspension of military education and training programs and the eventual embargo on Indonesia in the 1990s and early 2000s (Laksmana, 2021). While relations gradually resumed after the global war on terror, the experience prompted Indonesia to diversify its military ties (Gindarsah, 2016).

Compared with the long-standing military ties between the United States and Indonesia, Indonesia and China only restored their diplomatic relations in 1990. Indonesia's decision to reengage with China was driven by China's growing economic influence, which aligns with domestic political stability (Inkiriwang, 2021a). Over time, the relationship deepened with the signing of the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnerships on April 25, 2005, and was upgraded to an Indonesia-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership on October 2, 2013 (Wang & Miao, 2022). Like U.S-Indonesia ties, Sino-Indonesia relationships also experience ups and downs. In the 1990s, sensitivities and suspicions toward China persisted, while the 2000s and 2010s saw increased Chinese adventurism in the South China Sea (Sukma, 2009; Supriyanto, 2016). Despite such challenges, Indonesia continues to seek cooperation with China in military areas, including the initiation of the Sharp Knife joint military exercise in 2011 (Inkiriwang, 2021a). This cooperation stems from Indonesia's strategy to create an inclusive international order in which all major powers, including China, have a role to play (Priyandita, 2019).

With Indonesia engaging both the U.S and China in international military cooperation, a question arises: What is the level of U.S-Indonesia and Sino-Indonesia international military cooperation? Several authors have shown evidence that Indonesia's international military cooperation with the United States is stronger in terms of frequency, scale, and depth than with China (Anwar, 2023; Laksmana et al., 2024; Montratama & Yani, 2017b; Syafwi, 2009a; Yani, 2021b). Simultaneously, some consider international military cooperation with China to remain crucial because of its proximity to Indonesia, despite the weaker relationship (Gindarsah, 2016; Inkiriwang, 2021b). While most of the studies mentioned above offer valuable analytical narratives regarding Indonesia's international military cooperation with both the United States and China, thus enhancing our understanding of the historical context, driving factors, and tensions in both general and specific areas of cooperation, there is an increasing need to supplement the existing predominantly qualitative research with quantitative studies.

If one attempts to examine how much stronger Indonesia's international military cooperation with the United States is compared to China, the picture becomes somewhat unclear. Has it weakened, strengthened, or remained constant compared to that of previous periods? How has Indonesia's international military cooperation with China and the United States evolved since the 1990s? Despite the rapidly growing body of literature on this topic, these questions have only been partially addressed.

To address this gap, this study advances understanding of Indonesia's international military cooperation through a new methodological approach. Using two datasets, we introduce the International Military Cooperation Intensity (IMCI) Index to explore quantitative trends and changes in Indonesia's international military cooperation with China and the United States by measuring the intensity of these activities. This proposed index aggregates two indicators of international military cooperation—arms transfers and joint military exercises—to measure the intensity of international military cooperation.

The proposed index contributes to the literature on Indonesia's international military cooperation with China and the United States in four major ways. First, the Index aims to systematically assess the intensity of Indonesia's international military cooperation from 1995 to 2014 (20 years) across joint military exercises and arms transfers. Because the index accounts for variation in IMCI over time, it enables an overall assessment of Indonesia's international military cooperation in these areas. Second, the index enables differentiation and comparison between two areas of international military cooperation—arms transfers and joint military exercises—thereby facilitating the identification of the factors that drive Indonesia's relationships with China and the United States during specific periods. Third, the Index can act as an analytical framework that integrates and complements fragmented previous findings. This study establishes a clearer link between the evolving empirical literature on Indonesia's international military cooperation with both countries and advances the scholarly debate significantly. Finally, by constructing the IMCI index, this study contributes to the scholarly literature by employing a new methodological approach to measure Indonesia's international military cooperation.

By constructing the IMCI index, this study aims to draw descriptive inferences. Descriptive inferences involve gathering existing known facts, which are then combined to obtain previously non-existing facts (Mas'ood, 1990). Descriptive inferences differ from causal inference, which holds that any coherent account of causality must specify how the effects are exerted (King et al., 1994). This study did not intend to establish the causal mechanism underlying Indonesia's international military cooperation, a task more appropriate to qualitative studies than to quantitative research. This study examines the evolution of Indonesia's international military cooperation with the US and China. As a quantitative contribution to the international military cooperation literature, this research acknowledges that this index cannot account for intangible factors such as trust, identity, historical experiences, and the relevance and uniqueness of specific events. However, this study can complement and/or integrate previous studies by confirming their results through quantitative assessments.

METHODS

This study developed the IMCI index to measure Indonesia's international military cooperation over time systematically. Following Papageorgiou & Vieira (2024), the study adopted the five-point protocol and constructed the Military Cooperation Index using two indicators. The intensity levels were classified into five quantiles, with each quantile assigned a corresponding value for international military cooperation intensity. One corresponds to the "low," two to the "limited," three to the "moderate," four to the "enhanced," and five to the "comprehensive" IMCI level. The index is divided into four five-year periods: (1) 1995-1999; (2) 2000-2004; (3) 2005-2009; and (4) 2010-2014.

The index uses two indicators, arms transfers and bilateral joint military exercises, to measure the intensity of international military cooperation. These indicators do not encompass all dimensions of such cooperation. Other activities, including military education, military aid, and defense cooperation agreements, may also contribute to the assessment. However, the analysis is constrained by the availability of comparable public data. Beyond arms transfers and joint military exercises, no other publicly available datasets were identified that provide sufficiently consistent information for the study period. Therefore, the index is limited to these two indicators, which offer measurable and comparable data across the cases examined.

Despite these limitations, arms transfers and joint military exercises are among the most significant signals of international military cooperation. Arms transfers reveal the depth of military cooperation among states. States do not sell arms to those they consider unfriendly (D'Orazio, 2013). The sale of weapons often does not end when clients receive the arms but also involves a continuous relationship through the supply chain and sometimes technology transfer. Similarly, joint military exercises require agreements on shared threats and operational planning between states' armed forces (Lim & Cooper, 2015). Our IMCI Index does not capture every dimension of Indonesia's international military cooperation. However, it captures variation, evolution, and intensity across arms transfers and joint military exercises with the U.S and China.

The first indicator focuses on arms transfers. We use SIPRI's Arms Transfer Database to measure the level of arms transfers (SIPRI, n.d.). The SIPRI database contains arms transfer data from 1950 to 2022. Using this dataset, we extract the proportion of countries that exported arms to Indonesia from 1995 to 2014. We first rescale the continuous arms-transfer data to the range [0,1] using the unity method. The data are then divided into five quantiles. The final step is to calculate the intensity of arms transfer for each period and country using the equation below, which operationalizes the measure for comparative analysis.

$$A_i = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{t=1}^N Z_t \quad (1)$$

Where A_i is the arms intensity for country i , N is the number of observations or years, and Z_t represents the arms intensity values for each year t within that period.

For the measurement of joint military exercises as our second indicator, this study applies Selden (2013) coding scheme. To account for the importance of this indicator, this study coded "comprehensive" as corresponding to three exercises per year, "enhanced" to two bilateral joint military exercises per year, "moderate" to one exercise per year, "limited" to less than one exercise per year, and "low" as no cooperation in this activity. Data on joint military exercises were obtained from Bernhardt (2020).

Next, this study utilizes the family resemblance logic to aggregate our index. Family resemblance logic denies that any feature is a necessary condition for the concept; rather, features can be substituted for one another (Goertz, 2020). Under the logic of substitutability, various combinations can yield different levels of intensity in international military cooperation. For instance, a value of zero for one indicator will not diminish the value of another indicator during aggregation. The opposite of family resemblance logic, Aristotelian logic, is the best example of this decision. Under Aristotelian logic, an arms embargo will diminish the value of other indicators. This is because Aristotelian logic uses the mathematical concepts of necessary and sufficient conditions. This is not suitable for constructing the index. Despite the US arms embargo on Indonesia, both countries continue to conduct joint military exercises, such as CARAT (Bernhardt, 2020). Using Aristotelian logic instead of family resemblance logic means that, during aggregation, the resulting values will be zero, which contradicts empirical reality, since military cooperation continues despite such restraint. Thus, the family resemblance logic is appropriate for this study.

Regarding the aggregation method, this study follows the mean structure of Papageorgiou & Vieira (2024) mean structure. This involves simply summing the two indicators and dividing by the number of indicators. The resulting IMCI Index ranges from 1 to 5, indicating the intensity of international military cooperation between the two countries, according to our initial coding scheme.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

International Military Cooperation

The most agreed-upon definition of international cooperation emerged gradually in the 1980s. Under the liberal paradigm, international cooperation is defined as two or more actors adjusting their behavior to the actual or anticipated preferences of others through policy coordination (Keohane, 1984).

International military cooperation is a subset of international cooperation. In this study, international military cooperation occurs when two or more states adopt a policy for either (1) coordinating military activities for the benefit of some state or set of states or (2) enhancing the military power of at least one state (D'Orazio, 2013). Crucially, the policy must deliberately involve the military in some capacity to ensure its success. The indicators included in this definition are extensive. Several examples are military education, military aid, alliances, and defense cooperation agreements.

Our indicators, arms transfers and joint military exercises, are significant signals of the strength of international military cooperation. The transfer of arms indicates an increase in the recipient country's military power (Waltz, 1979). The sale of weapons not only increases the military power of recipients but also serves as a strategic move to shore up relationships for both sides (D'Orazio, 2013). For example, while the U.S exports F-35 to its allies, the fighter jets remain unavailable for purchase by Indonesia (Dwi, 2025). This example indicates that arms transfers reveal the depth of international military cooperation. Like arms transfers, joint military exercises can also serve to increase military power. Exercises with other countries can provide new knowledge and tactics that refine their capabilities. The Garuda Shield exercise serves as an example of how the TNI has refined its peacekeeping capabilities (Inkiriwang, 2021a).

When measuring the IMCI index, it does not matter how states cooperate. This is because the study focuses on descriptive inferences rather than on uncovering the causal mechanism behind these observations. The important factor in this research is that cooperation is observed regardless of how it is observed.

Arms Transfer Intensity

Arms transfer is an important component of Indonesia's international military cooperation. Importing arms is part of Indonesia's internal balancing strategy and is considered an important activity of international military cooperation to increase Indonesia's military capabilities (Gindarsah, 2016; Syafwi, 2009b). The results depicted in Table 1 indicate that during the late Suharto era, the United States remained an important arms exporter for Indonesia's military. This is consistent with Inkiriwang (2020) and Laksmana (2021), who argue that the United States was one of the TNI's main suppliers during that period. The literature also shows that this period was affected by U.S sanctions on several arms exports to Indonesia following the 1991 Santa Cruz incident (Haripin, 2020). However, they did not reduce the intensity as much as in the next period (Inkiriwang, 2020). During the same period, China exported no arms to Indonesia. The Chinese tended to be more focused on the modernization of the People's Liberation Army (Papageorgiou & Vieira, 2024), and Indonesia under Suharto remained wary of China's influence (Sukma, 2009).

Table 1. Arms Transfer Indicator Results

<i>Country</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Scale</i>	<i>Arms Transfer Intensity Level</i>
China	1995-1999	0	1	Low
China	2000-2004	0	1	Low
China	2005-2009	0.07	1	Low
China	2010-2014	0.27	3	Moderate
United States	1995-1999	0.13	3	Moderate
United States	2000-2004	0.07	2	Limited
United States	2005-2009	0.1	2	Limited
United States	2010-2014	0.21	3	Moderate

Source: Author's calculations

During the early reformasi period, the level of intensity with the Chinese remained the same, with no arms exports into Indonesia, while the U.S. shows the intensity level degrading to “limited.” Based on the empirical research from this period, the Timor-Timor referendum can be associated with a downgrading of the level of intensity of arms transfers between the United States and Indonesia. Pro-Indonesian militias supported by the TNI were blamed for the disaster in post-referendum Timor-Timor, which resulted in increased violence and human rights infringements in the province, attracting international community attention (Mietzner, 2009). Indonesia's inability to reign in this problem destroyed Indonesia's international reputation and led to the intervention of the United Nations peacekeeping mission led by Australia in soon-to-be Timor Leste (Haripin, 2020). The United States also imposed a stricter arms embargo and severed its defense ties with Indonesia (Haseman, 2006). This resulted in the downgrade of arms transfer intensity whereby the previous period Indonesia imported arms with a value of US\$ 71 million, in this period the value was reduced by US\$ 56 million to US \$ 15 million. The data presented in this period is in line with several research, confirming their assesments regarding the level of international military cooperation with the United States on arms trade.

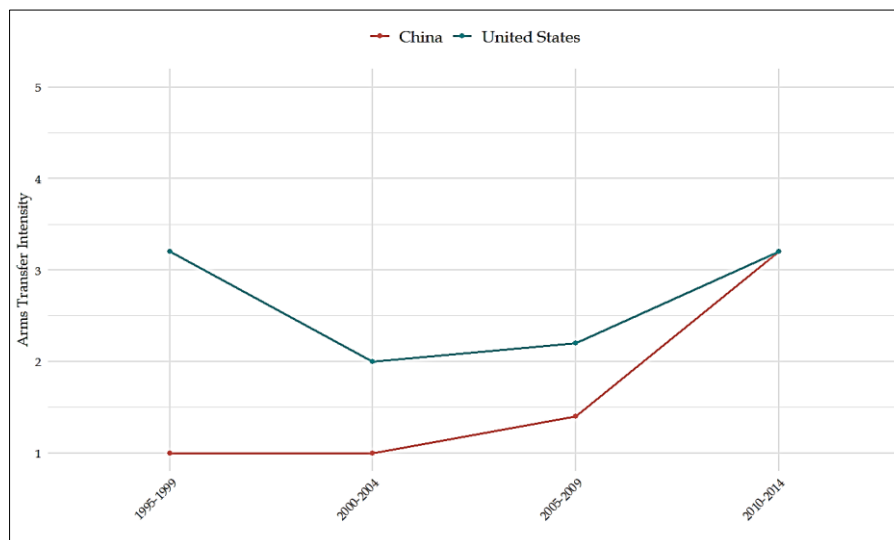


Figure 1. Arms Transfer Intensity (1995 – 2014)

Source: Author visualization

Despite improvements in the relationship under the first presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, arms trade with the United States remains limited. President George W. Bush officially lifted the arms embargo on Indonesia in 2005 (Hikmawati, 2023). Despite the removal of the embargo, Indonesia changed its strategy to diversify its arms suppliers to reduce vulnerability (Storey, 2021). At the same time, China began exporting arms to Indonesia, with an overall value of US\$ 16 million during this period.

The IMCI Index for the final period shows significant development in international cooperation on the arms trade with China and the United States. As shown in Figure 1 and Table 1, the intensity of arms transfers increased for both countries. The United States increased its cooperation with Indonesia by one point to a moderate level, returning to the first period of intensity. Indonesia imported arms from the United States, with a value of US\$ 232 million higher than the previous period, illustrating an increase in the volume of arms transfers and cooperation between countries that were previously at odds due to human rights infringements. United States remains an important supplier of advanced systems, particularly for the Indonesian Army and Air Force, with orders for F100 and F404 aircraft engines supporting Indonesia's fighter jet fleet, including the F-16C (SIPRI, n.d.).

China, on the other hand, accelerated its arms transfer intensity by two points from a low to a moderate level. Interestingly, Chinese arms exports were valued at US\$ 186 million, a difference of US\$ 170 million from the previous period, indicating a strengthening of arms transfer intensity between the two countries. Among the system exports were the C-802 and C-705 anti-ship missiles. This diversification is consistent with the literature that Indonesia wants to maintain diplomatic leverage over arms suppliers (Gindarsah, 2016).

Bilateral Joint Military Exercises Intensity

Overall, the results for this indicator indicate that the intensity of joint military exercises increased in both countries. China remains a lower priority for Indonesia in the first three periods, with joint military exercises at "low" intensity and no activity. Nevertheless, the last period shows increased cooperation with China in joint military exercises. Driven by U.S. sanctions on Kopassus and the signing of the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership in 2010, Indonesia and China conducted the Sharp Knife joint military exercises, which included special forces from both countries. This event was the first joint exercise between the two countries' special forces (Inkiriwang, 2021a). This exercise was held annually from 2011 until 2014 and served as a milestone for Indonesia's international military cooperation with China. By engaging with China, Kopassus was able to conduct counter-terrorism exercises. In contrast, the United States still denied Kopassus the chance to work with the U.S. Armed Forces due to past human rights infringements.

Table 2. JME Indicator Results

Country	Period	Mean	Scale	JME Intensity Level
China	1995-1999	0	1	Low

China	2000-2004	0	1	Low
China	2005-2009	0	1	Low
China	2010-2014	0.4	2	Limited
United States	1995-1999	1.2	3	Moderate
United States	2000-2004	0.6	2	Limited
United States	2005-2009	2.4	3	Moderate
United States	2010-2014	3.4	5	Comprehensive

Source: Author's calculations using data from (Bernhardt, 2020)

Despite a brief setback, the United States showed an improvement in this indicator. The 1995-1999 period under Suharto shows that Indonesia's intensity of joint military exercises with the United States was already moderate. Indonesia conducted several exercises with the United States during this period, according to Bernhardt (2020). Several examples are the CARAT training with the Indonesian Navy and the Cope West exercise with the Air Force. As with the arms transfer indicator, Timor-Leste's issues will hamper progress in this sector in the next period. Sukadis (2018) reported a decline in cooperation with the United States during this period. Table 2 and Figure 2 show that Indonesia reduced the intensity of joint military exercises to a limited extent.

Under the first term of the SBY presidency, the relationship returned to a moderate level, as previously seen in the Suharto era. Some examples of joint military exercises during this period include the continuation of CARAT with the Indonesian Navy, Teak Iron with the Air Force, and, most notably, the initiation of Garuda Shield in 2007. Building on Indonesia's peacekeeping aspiration (Anwar, 2014; Haripin, 2020), the first iteration of the Garuda Shield exercise, which remained the only bilateral exercise in the series until 2011, focused specifically on peace support operations (Alviani et al., 2023; Inkiriwang, 2021a).

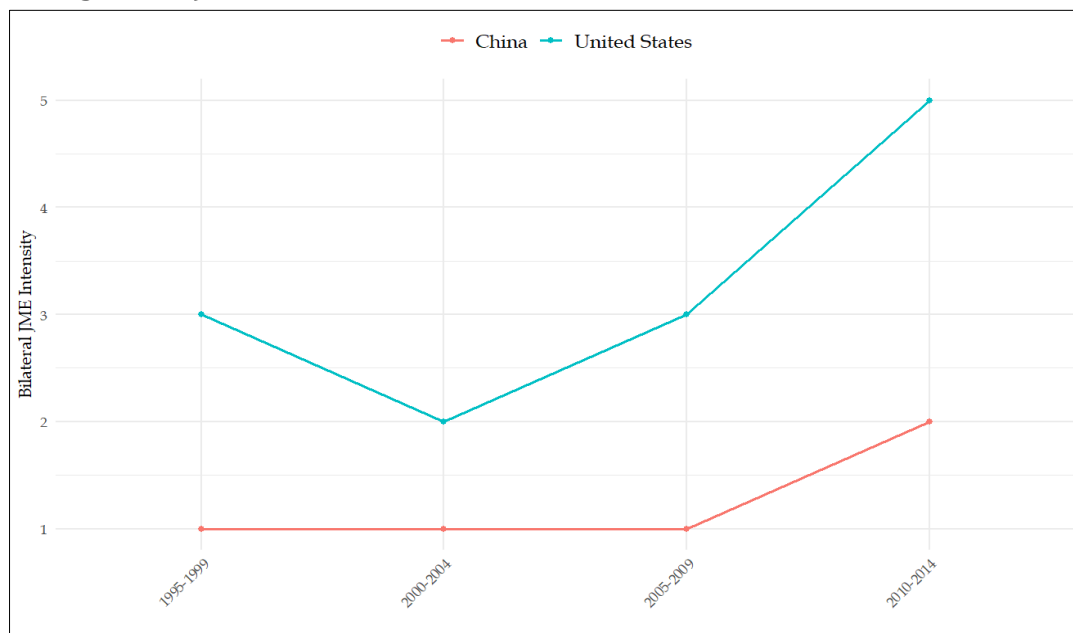


Figure 2. Bilateral Joint Military Exercises Intensity
Source: Author visualization using data from Bernhardt (2020)

In the last period, there was a two-point increase in the intensity of joint military exercises, from moderate to comprehensive. During this period, Indonesia and the United States signed the Joint Comprehensive Partnership in 2010, enhancing both countries' international military cooperation. As the exercises from the previous period became institutionalized and supported by legal frameworks, they became annual events for both armed forces to train together, such as Garuda Shield. This reinforced the intensity of joint military exercises (Montolalu et al., 2023), unlike previous periods, when some years did not conduct at least one military exercise.

International Military Cooperation Intensity Index

The IMCI index was designed to analyze the intensity of Indonesia's international military cooperation with China and the United States. The overall results in Table 3 and Figure 3 indicate that Indonesia decided to engage both China and the United States through international military cooperation. Based on the IMCI index, there were significant improvements in the intensity of international military cooperation with both countries compared to the first period. The existing evidence confirms an increase in international military cooperation, at least according to these two indicators, as reflected in both arms trade and joint military exercises from 1995 to 14.

Table 3. IMCI Index Results

Country	Period	Index Score	IMCI Level
China	1995-1999	1	Low
China	2000-2004	1	Low
China	2005-2009	1.2	Low
China	2010-2014	2.6	Limited
United States	1995-1999	3.1	Moderate
United States	2000-2004	2	Limited
United States	2005-2009	2.6	Limited
United States	2010-2014	4.1	Enhanced

Source: Author's calculations using data from arms transfer and joint military exercises intensity.

According to the IMCI index, China's international military cooperation was low during the first two periods. However, from 2005 to 2009, the IMCI index slowly increased Indonesia's cooperation with China. This relationship continued into the following period, with a shift in the scale from low to "limited" levels of international military cooperation. Despite China's rising power status becoming clearer post-2008 financial crisis in terms of actual and potential power, with the displacement of Japan in 2010 as the second largest economy in the world and the continued enhancement of the People's Liberation Army military capability, most notably visible by the commissioning of its first Aircraft Carrier Liaoning (Xuetong, 2019), Indonesia continues to increase its cooperation with China.

While the need for diversification also intensified during the 2005-2009 period, the growing clarity of China's position as a rising power did not deter Indonesia from

undermining its relations with China. China's increasing assertiveness further substantiates this with respect to issues in the South China Sea. From the IMCI Index, arms trade intensity between the two countries remains higher than during joint military exercises, as shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

In contrast to China, the intensity of international military cooperation with the United States is non-linear. The level of intensity starts high with a moderate level, above what China can achieve in all four periods. This is consistent with the long history of Indonesia-U.S. military cooperation (Laksmiana, 2021). However, from 2000 to 2004, the level of intensity declined to some extent, setting back relations between Indonesia and the United States, most likely due to a military embargo on joint military exercises and arms transfers. According to the IMCI index, the next period shows a surge in the intensity of defense diplomacy between the two countries, despite their previous experiences with military embargoes. Finally, the last period showcases the highest level of intensity between the two countries, with enhanced military cooperation. In contrast to China, the United States' joint military exercises relationship is stronger than its arms transfers.

Based on the current evidence presented above, Indonesia has increasingly reinforced its international military cooperation with both countries. By the end of 2014, the United States' international military cooperation remained higher, with a score of 4.1, while China's was 2.6, as shown in Tables 3 and 4. However, Indonesia also engages with China despite its growing power and assertiveness in the South China Sea.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

The study assesses the intensity of Indonesia's international military cooperation with China and the United States from 1995 to 2014 using the International Military Cooperation Intensity (IMCI) Index. The index measures the intensity of cooperation based on joint military exercises and arms transfers. The results indicate that Indonesia's military cooperation with the United States remained stronger than its cooperation with China throughout the study period. However, cooperation with China also increased through joint military exercises and arms transfers. The study draws two main conclusions. First, the IMCI Index shows that Indonesia's international military cooperation with both China and the United States increased during the study period. Indonesia maintained and expanded its military cooperation with the United States while simultaneously developing military cooperation with China. Second, Indonesia's military cooperation with the United States remained stronger than its cooperation with China, based on the two indicators examined: joint military exercises and arms transfers.

The IMCI Index provides a quantitative basis for examining variations in Indonesia's international military cooperation across indicators and time periods. The index can complement qualitative assessments by providing measurable evidence of changes in the intensity of cooperation. Triangulation can further integrate quantitative findings with qualitative assessments to support a more comprehensive analysis of Indonesia's international military cooperation.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The analysis covers only the 1995–2014 period and therefore does not capture developments during subsequent presidencies, including the presidency of Joko Widodo. In addition, the IMCI Index uses only two indicators: joint military exercises and arms transfers. These indicators do not capture the full range of international military cooperation, including military education, defense assistance, and defense cooperation agreements. Data availability limited the inclusion of additional indicators in the present study.

Future research should extend the analysis to more recent periods and incorporate additional indicators of international military cooperation. Expanding the indicator set would provide a broader measurement of cooperation intensity and allow further assessment of changes in Indonesia's military relations with China and the United States.

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