

MUSYAWARAH AS ARCHITECTURE: Indigenous Norms, Great Power Coexistence, and Indonesia's Naval Diplomacy in MNEK 2025

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Abstrak

Latihan Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK) ke 5 tahun 2025 menghadirkan teka teki konstitutif: bagaimana sebuah middle power non blok dapat menghimpun aktivitas angkatan laut kooperatif di antara great powers yang saling bersaing, yaitu Amerika Serikat, China, dan Rusia, di tengah rivalitas Indo Pasifik yang tajam? Studi ini berargumen bahwa desain kelembagaan Indonesia dalam MNEK 2025, yang dibentuk oleh norma deliberatif lokal Musyawarah dan diperkuat oleh prinsip kooperatif Islam Al Ta'awwun, membantu menjelaskan bagaimana latihan ini menurunkan biaya politik partisipasi tanpa menjadikan norma norma tersebut sebagai satu satunya penyebab kehadiran great powers. Dengan menggunakan studi kasus tunggal eksplanatoris kualitatif dengan process tracing tertanam, analisis ini menelaah komunikasi resmi TNI AL, pidato pembukaan, keluaran konferensi perencanaan, dan liputan pers berkualitas. Empat klaster empiris dianalisis: Musyawarah sebagai logika desain kelembagaan, Al Ta'awwun sebagai pembimbingan kemanusiaan, penurunan biaya politik melalui Operasi Militer Selain Perang, dan pembangunan kepercayaan melalui iterasi MNEK dari 2014 hingga 2025. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa undangan universal, pengecualian domain

tempur, dan program aksi sipil menerjemahkan komitmen normatif Indonesia ke dalam ruang diplomatik yang permisif bagi partisipasi simultan. Studi ini berkontribusi pada IR konstruktivis dan diplomasi pertahanan dengan menunjukkan bagaimana tradisi deliberatif non Barat dapat menginformasikan praktik keamanan inklusif, sembari mengakui bahwa kepentingan material, insentif reputasional, dan non blok Indonesia yang kredibel juga membentuk hasil tersebut.

Kata Kunci:

Konstruktivisme, Indonesia, Musyawarah, Al Ta'awwun

Abstract

The 5th Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK) 2025 raises a constitutive puzzle: how can a non aligned middle power convene cooperative naval activity among rival great powers, the United States, China, and Russia, amid acute Indo Pacific rivalry? This study argues that Indonesia's institutional design of MNEK 2025, shaped by the indigenous deliberative norm of Musyawarah and reinforced by the Islamic cooperative principle of Al Ta'awwun, helps explain how the exercise lowered the political costs of participation without making these norms the sole cause of great power attendance. Using a qualitative explanatory single case study with embedded process tracing, the analysis examines official TNI AL communiqués, opening speeches, planning conference outputs, and quality press coverage. Four empirical clusters are analyzed: Musyawarah as institutional design logic, Al Ta'awwun as humanitarian framing, political cost reduction through Operations Military Other Than War, and confidence building through repeated MNEK iterations from 2014 to 2025. The findings suggest that universal invitation, exclusion of combat domains, and civic action programming translated Indonesian normative commitments into a permissive diplomatic setting for simultaneous participation. The study contributes to constructivist IR and defense diplomacy by showing how non Western deliberative traditions can inform inclusive security practices, while acknowledging that material interests, reputational incentives, and Indonesia's credible non alignment also shaped the outcome.

Keywords:

Constructivism, Indonesia, Musyawarah, Al Ta'awwun.

Introduction

In February 2025, warships from around the world assembled off the coast of Bali, Indonesia, not for conflict but for cooperation. The occasion was the 5th Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK) – a biennial multinational naval drill unique in its exclusive focus on

humanitarian assistance and disaster relief rather than combat operations (ANTARA 2025a; ANTARA 2025b). Indonesia's Navy, host of MNEK, brought together 38 countries including major powers often at odds – the United States, China, Russia, India, Australia, among others (Dangwal 2025; ANTARA 2025a). Such an expansive gathering of navies in a non combat setting, under the banner “Maritime Partnership for Peace and Stability,” raises a salient question for International Relations (IR) theory: This study therefore asks: how does the institutional design of MNEK, grounded in Indonesia's indigenous deliberative norm of *Musyawarah*, help make possible the simultaneous participation of rival great powers the United States, China, and Russia in the Indo Pacific security environment of 2025?

This paper argues that the conduct and objectives of MNEK 2025 are best explained by a constructivist IR framework emphasizing the role of local norms and identities. In particular, we focus on two concepts deeply rooted in Indonesian and Islamic political culture – *musyawarah* (deliberation to reach consensus) and *al ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) – as normative drivers of Indonesia's multilateral naval diplomacy. Constructivist theory posits that state behavior is not determined solely by material power or institutional constraints, but also by intersubjective ideas, norms, and identities (Wendt 1992). We contend that Indonesia's approach to MNEK 2025 epitomizes this principle: the exercise was not merely a pragmatic search for security gains, but an enactment of Indonesia's identity as a promoter of cooperative security and its aspiration to reconcile diverse powers through dialogue and mutual aid. *Musyawarah* and *al ta'awun*, long standing values in Indonesian society and Islamic ethics, provided the ideational framework that shaped the exercise's inclusive participation and humanitarian agenda.

Indonesia's foreign and defence policy traditions lend credence to this interpretation. Since the country's founding ideology of *Pancasila* was formulated, principles of peaceful resolution of conflicts (*musyawarah untuk mufakat*, meaning “consultation to reach consensus”) have been paramount in domestic governance and regional diplomacy (Stubbs 2019). In the ASEAN context, the norm of *musyawarah* (often coupled with *mufakat* or consensus) has been identified as a foundational “ASEAN Way” principle that Indonesia, as a leading member, champions to ensure all voices are heard and differences are resolved without coercion (Stubbs 2019). Stubbs (2019) notes that the core values underlying ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation are *musyawarah* and *mufakat*, rooted in traditional Indonesian approaches to decision making that strive to accommodate

all parties' interests(Stubbs 2019). These norms have also influenced Indonesia's international posture; Jakarta frequently positions itself as a mediator and consensus builder in regional affairs. In parallel, Islamic teachings prevalent in Indonesia reinforce the ethos of cooperation. The Qur'anic principle of *al ta'awun*, meaning mutual assistance in virtue and piety, exhorts communities to help one another (Qur'an 5:2). This principle has been interpreted in Indonesia's socio political context as a call for solidarity and collective action in addressing common challenges (Hasan 2012). Musyawarah and *al ta'awun* together constitute a normative prism through which Indonesian policymakers view international collaboration: as an extension of domestic values of consultation and mutual help onto the global stage.

The case of MNEK 2025 is analytically useful because it operationalized these values in concrete ways. Unlike typical military exercises premised on alliance building or deterrence, Komodo is explicitly a "non combat joint exercise" dedicated to humanitarian and disaster response cooperation (ANTARA 2025a). Since its inception in 2014, when the Indonesian Navy launched the first MNEK under President Susilo Yudhoyono's administration, the exercise has been portrayed as an innovative form of multilateral defence diplomacy (Inkiriwang 2021). Inkiriwang (2021) observes that Indonesia's defence diplomacy had traditionally been confined to bilateral exercises, but the initiation of MNEK in 2014 marked a strategic shift to engage a broader set of international partners in line with Indonesia's growing international role. President Joko Widodo's Global Maritime Fulcrum vision, which cast Indonesia as a "maritime fulcrum" between the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Parameswaran 2018), further reinforced the idea of Indonesia taking leadership in convening cooperative maritime activities. MNEK became a signature program serving that vision, aligning with the administration's emphasis on maritime cooperation, stability, and the non traditional security agenda.

By 2025, the geopolitical context of MNEK had grown more complex. Major power rivalries in the Indo Pacific – notably between the US and China, and the fallout of Russia's actions in Ukraine – challenged the stability of the region. Realist IR theory would predict that in such an environment, states would strengthen military alliances or engage in balancing behavior, possibly curtailing multilateral endeavors that include rival states (Mearsheimer 2001). Indeed, multilateral military exercises often occur within alliance structures or exclude adversaries. MNEK 2025 defied this pattern: Indonesia invited navies from 56 countries (ANTARA 2024), spanning all major power blocs and non aligned states, and ultimately 38 countries participated

with naval assets (ANTARA 2025b). Notably, warships of the US, China, and Russia – nations often seen as strategic competitors – sailed alongside each other in friendly maneuvers. Such inclusivity and neutrality reflect an Indonesian diplomatic strategy of “all directional engagement,” consistent with the country’s long held free and active (*bebas aktif*) foreign policy doctrine. From a constructivist perspective, this inclusive approach is not merely balancing behavior, but the expression of a collective identity that Indonesia seeks to foster: a community of nations united in tackling shared human security challenges.

This paper explains why constructivist attention to locally embedded norms offers a more precise account of MNEK 2025 than either realist balancing or liberal institutional coordination alone.

Method

This study uses a qualitative explanatory single case design to examine MNEK 2025 as a case of Indonesia's norm informed naval diplomacy. The analysis combines content analysis and process tracing of publicly accessible sources, including TNI AL communiqués, planning conference materials, official speeches, participant statements, and quality press coverage. Constructivist IR guides the interpretation by treating Musyawarah, Al Ta'awwun, political cost reduction, and iterative confidence building as observable analytical categories rather than assumed causal certainties. Evidence is read across four indicators: inclusive invitation and planning design, humanitarian and OMOTW framing, calibrated asset selection by major powers, and continuity across MNEK iterations from 2014 to 2025. Triangulation across official Indonesian sources, international reporting, and participant statements is used to reduce single source bias. Because the study is based on one case and public documents, its claims are analytically bounded: it identifies a plausible mechanism through which Indonesia's design helped lower participation barriers, not a necessary or sufficient cause of great power attendance.

Throughout the analysis, we maintained theoretical consistency by using constructivist concepts as explanatory tools. We refrained from positivist hypothesis testing in the statistical sense; instead, we employed process tracing within the case. The proposed causal mechanism operates as a multi stage chain: (Musyawarah derived institutional design) → (political cost reduction through restriction of operational scope to non combat domains and humanitarian framing) → (Al Ta'awwun based normative reframing of military interaction as collective provision of public goods rather than competitive

signaling) → (iterative confidence building through cumulative non threatening interaction across MNEK iterations from 2014 to 2025) → (simultaneous participation of the United States, China, and Russia in a single multilateral exercise). This mechanism operates under three scope conditions: (a) the host state maintains credible non alignment (Bebas Aktif), such that no participant perceives the exercise as directed against it; (b) the operational scope excludes domains anti submarine warfare, anti air warfare, electronic warfare that would require revealing classified capabilities; and (c) the exercise frequency is sufficient to permit cumulative trust accumulation. Following Beach and Pedersen's (2013) process tracing protocol, evidence is categorized by diagnostic value straw in the wind, hoop, smoking gun, or doubly decisive to assess whether the theorized mechanism, rather than material inducement or bandwagoning, accounts for the observed outcome.

Musyawah as Institutional Design Logic

The roster of participating countries spanned every continent and included both regional neighbors and distant partners. According to official lists, 16 countries sent naval ships to Bali: among them were major Asia Pacific states (Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, Russia, the United States) and several ASEAN members (Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, Vietnam) (ANTARA 2025a). European navies (France, the United Kingdom, Italy) and countries from the Middle East and South Asia (Pakistan, Iran) also contributed vessels (ANTARA 2025a). Notably, Russia deployed three ships from its Pacific Fleet, including two Steregushchiy class corvettes and a tanker (Dangwal 2025), the largest foreign contingent. Other countries mostly sent one ship each, though a few, like Malaysia, Iran, India and Singapore, each contributed two vessels (ANTARA 2025a). Beyond those sending hardware, many additional nations attended by sending observer delegations or navy leaders – bringing the total count to 38. These included smaller states or those without spare ships for deployment, from Bahrain and Fiji to European and African countries (ANTARA 2025a). High level representation was evident: nine Chiefs of Navy from various countries attended the event, and the United States sent its Indo Pacific Combatant Commander (a four star admiral) as an official guest (NusaBali 2025). Such turnout underscored the diplomatic weight of MNEK 2025 as an international gathering.

In addition to HADR drills, MNEK 2025 featured forums for direct exchange among naval professionals. A series of Subject Matter Expert Exchanges (SMEEs) and seminars were organized, in which naval

officers and specialists gave presentations and shared experiences on topics such as humanitarian logistics, maritime search and rescue techniques, and pandemic response at sea (ANTARA 2025a). One notable event was the International Maritime Security Symposium (IMSS), held on February 17 in conjunction with the exercise (ANTARA 2024; ANTARA 2025b). The IMSS is a high level conference initiated by the Indonesian Navy, and in 2025 it was integrated with MNEK to maximize international attendance. Delegates from dozens of countries – including senior naval commanders and defense academics – convened in Bali to discuss regional maritime security issues (ANTARA 2025b). According to the official agenda, topics ranged from maritime domain awareness and naval cooperation in the Indo Pacific, to emerging non traditional threats like climate change impacts on security. By hosting IMSS alongside the exercise, Indonesia provided a *musyawarah* style dialogue platform: different viewpoints could be aired and a consensus sought on principles for maritime cooperation. This reflects Indonesia's intent not just to drill physical operations but to shape shared understandings through discourse. Bilateral meetings were also arranged on the sidelines of MNEK – Indonesian naval leaders held talks with counterparts from various visiting navies, reinforcing defence ties on a one to one basis (ANTARA 2025a). Such diplomatic networking often runs in parallel with the multilateral setting, and for smaller participant states, the chance to meet many partners in one venue was likely as valuable as the exercise itself.

Indonesia's *Musyawarah* derived design logic is most legibly documented in the exercise's planning architecture. The preparation for MNEK 2025 spanned nearly a year, structured around three iterative consensus building conferences: the Initial Planning Conference (IPC), held in mid 2024, established the core "Partnership for Peace" theme and distributed invitations to 56–58 nations; the Middle Planning Conference (MPC), conducted October 29–31, 2024, at Nusa Dua, Bali, refined the HA/DR scenario injects and synchronized tactical objectives across delegations; and the Final Planning Conference (FPC), executed January 8–9, 2025, in Denpasar, where 37 participant nations finalized the Schedule of Events, communication frequencies, and safety maneuvering protocols (TNI AL 2025a). The FPC's Tactical Floor Game a full simulation of Sea Phase maneuvers required consensus among commanding officers before any vessel put to sea. This multi stage, iterative, consensus before execution architecture is *Musyawarah* institutionalized at the operational level: no decision

proceeds without inclusive deliberation, and no participant is presented with a *fait accompli*.

Significantly, the exercise design avoided any combat simulations or wargames. There were no “red team vs blue team” adversarial scenarios. A sailing pass and formation exercise replaced any live fire drills (Parameswaran 2018); even when boarding techniques were practiced, it was in the context of interdicting smugglers or providing aid, not capturing enemy vessels. This was a deliberate choice and a signature element of MNEK’s identity. Admiral Ali reiterated during the exercise that *“this event is a non combat joint exercise... focusing on disaster response and humanitarian operations”* (ANTARA 2024; ANTARA 2025a). The rationale, as he explained, is drawn from Indonesia’s own experience of natural disasters: *“We survived the tsunami disaster and received help from other countries. Therefore, we must practice to enhance our performance and provide assistance more effectively”* (Dangwal 2025). By casting the exercise in this cooperative light, Indonesia differentiated MNEK from other multilateral drills in the region, such as the U.S. led RIMPAC or joint war games that often carry implicit deterrent messages. MNEK’s non combat orientation made it politically acceptable for virtually any country to join – even those who might be uneasy participating in exercises perceived as targeted at a third party. This helps explain why China and Russia were comfortable attending (as the exercises did not center on, say, contested territory scenarios), and likewise why the U.S. and its allies could justify involvement (humanitarian drills have universal appeal). In summary, the operational content of MNEK 2025 was carefully tailored to maximize inclusivity and highlight mutual benefits, resonating strongly with the norm of *al ta’awun*.

Al Ta’awun as Humanitarian Framing Mechanism

The exercise theme “Maritime Partnership for Peace and Stability” encoded *Al Ta’awun* cooperative obligation in shared challenges at the rhetorical level, but the norm’s causal weight is most visible in the operational content selection and official framing. Admiral Muhammad Ali, addressing the opening ceremony on February 16, 2025, did not frame the exercise in terms of capability demonstration or strategic positioning. He invoked Indonesia’s experience of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami as the normative warrant for MNEK: *“We survived the tsunami disaster and received help from other countries. Therefore, we must practice to enhance our performance and provide assistance more effectively”* (ANTARA 2025b). This genealogy humanitarian need as the founding rationale is

Al Ta'awwun as foreign policy logic: the obligation to help others is rooted in having been helped. Separately, Ambassador Fabien Penone of France framed his navy's participation not in terms of power projection but in terms of shared threats: "illegal fishing, drug smuggling, and disaster management" precisely the non competitive challenges that Al Ta'awwun identifies as warranting cooperative obligation (ANTARA 2025b).

The civic action component should be compressed into one evidence focused paragraph. MNEK 2025 translated Al Ta'awwun into visible humanitarian programming through ENCAP, MEDCAP, environmental activities, and community services in Bali. ENCAP in Antiga Kelod focused on public infrastructure for fishing communities, while MEDCAP used KRI Dr. Wahidin Sudirohusodo to deliver health services including check ups, dental care, blood donation, and selected minor procedures. The same humanitarian frame was extended through mangrove planting, turtle release, and beach clean up activities. These activities matter analytically because they made cooperation observable as public goods provision rather than combat signaling, thereby strengthening the exercise's non threatening profile for rival participants.

The operational phase should be reported only insofar as it supports the analytical category. At sea, MNEK 2025 centered on HADR, SAR, maritime interdiction against non traditional threats, replenishment coordination, table top planning, command post coordination, and field training. The International Maritime Security Symposium and Subject Matter Expert Exchanges added a deliberative layer by allowing naval officers and officials to discuss shared maritime risks within a non alliance forum. Together, these activities show that Al Ta'awwun was not only rhetorical: it structured the menu of tasks through which participating navies could cooperate without entering combat oriented scenarios.

Political Cost Reduction: Great Power Participation Evidence

The 5th Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo was held in Bali, Indonesia from February 15–22, 2025(ANTARA 2025a). It represented the revival and expansion of a series that began in 2014 and had skipped its 2020 and 2022 iterations (the hiatus was due largely to global disruptions, including the COVID 19 pandemic, as implied by officials) (Dangwal 2025). MNEK 2025 was the largest edition to date, bringing together 38 participating nations and a wide array of naval assets. Admiral Muhammad Ali, the Indonesian Navy Chief of Staff, announced at the opening ceremony that 19 foreign warships were

present alongside 17 Indonesian Navy ships (KRI), for a total of 36 ships in the exercise flotilla (ANTARA 2025b). These vessels ranged from advanced warships to auxiliary and coast guard vessels, reflecting a diverse mix of capabilities. In addition, Indonesia deployed seven helicopters and three maritime patrol aircraft to support the drills (ANTARA 2025b). Approximately 3,000 naval personnel from all participant countries were involved, a figure highlighted by Indonesian officials who hoped the influx of international sailors would also generate a local tourism boost in Bali (NusaBali 2025).

The behavioral evidence for political cost reduction is most direct in the asset selection patterns of the three rival great powers. The United States deployed USS Dewey (DDG 105), an Arleigh Burke class guided missile destroyer from DESRON 15, accompanied by a P 8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft a single ship commitment that matched the exercise's non escalatory tone rather than the carrier strike group presence the US deploys in high intensity exercises (Dangwal 2025). The People's Liberation Army Navy integrated MNEK participation into the homeward voyage of its 46th Naval Escort Group returning from the Gulf of Aden, deploying CNS Jiaozuo (Type 052D guided missile destroyer), CNS Xuchang (Type 054A frigate), and CNS Honghu (Type 903A replenishment ship) framing attendance as routine rather than exceptional (Dangwal 2025). Russia deployed Steregushchiy class corvettes RFS Rezkiy and RFS Aldar Tsydenzhapov from the Pacific Fleet modern combatants signaling capability without the provocation of legacy destroyer deployments accompanied by the tanker Pechenga (Dangwal 2025). Three observations follow. First, none of the three powers deployed their most capable platforms. Second, all three used communication protocols based on CUES (Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea) rather than NATO specific tactical data links, ensuring communication neutrality. Third, the simultaneous in port and at sea co presence of these three navies has not been replicated in any alliance centric exercise in the contemporary Indo Pacific confirming that MNEK's design produced an outcome that combat oriented exercise formats structurally preclude.

The asset record is the clearest place to make the political cost argument auditable because it allows the reader to compare participation without converting the Results section into a long descriptive list.

Tabel 1. Great power participation and political cost reduction indicators in MNEK 2025

Great power participant	Asset pattern reported in Results	Political implication	cost
United States	USS Dewey and P 8A Poseidon rather than a carrier strike formation	Participation signaled commitment without converting MNEK into alliance centered power projection.	
China	46th Naval Escort Group assets integrated into a return voyage	Attendance could be framed as routine multilateral engagement rather than strategic concession.	
Russia	Two Pacific Fleet corvettes and tanker support	Russia could display presence while remaining within a non combat humanitarian exercise frame.	

Source: authors’ synthesis of the findings in Section 3.3; empirical details follow ANTARA (2025a), ANTARA (2025b), and Dangwal (2025), as already cited in that subsection.

The table does not prove that MNEK's design caused participation. It shows a narrower point: each rival power selected a participation format compatible with Indonesia's non combat design, which supports the claim that the exercise lowered visible political costs.

Confidence Building Through Iterative Engagement (2014–2025)

The confidence building dimension of the proposed mechanism is legible only longitudinally. MNEK's inaugural 2014 iteration, held in Batam, Natuna, and Anambas, established the inclusive format and non combat scope, but was immediately tested when Australia withdrew due to bilateral tensions with Indonesia over border protection policy a demonstration of the format's fragility under geopolitical pressure (Parameswaran 2018). The 2016 Padang iteration expanded participation to 36 countries and introduced the International Fleet Review, adding a ceremonial dimension that raised the reputational

stakes of attendance. The 2018 Lombok iteration consolidated the biannual cycle and cemented ENCAP and MEDCAP as structural features rather than optional additions. Following a COVID induced hiatus in 2020 and 2022, the 2023 Makassar iteration was the first post pandemic iteration to achieve US China co presence confirming that the format survived years of global disruption and heightening Sino US rivalry (Inkiriwang 2021; Dangwal 2025). By 2025, the longitudinal pattern is unambiguous: participation expanded from the inaugural edition to 38 nations despite the intensification of US China strategic competition, the Russia Ukraine war, and the hardening of Indo Pacific alliance structures. Each iteration even those marked by geopolitical shocks maintained the format's core design features, validating the expectation of continuity that CBM theory requires. The MPC and FPC planning conferences reinforce this iterative logic at the institutional level: returning delegations build on prior year agreements rather than renegotiating from scratch, creating accumulated institutional knowledge that lowers transaction costs and embeds Musyawarah derived norms ever more deeply in the exercise's operational DNA.

Anomalies: Identity Projection and Hard Power Signaling Within the Soft Power Frame

Two anomalies complicate the Musyawarah/Al Ta'awwun framework without disconfirming it. First, France's deployment of the Floréal class surveillance frigate FNS Vendémiaire (F734), a low intensity platform optimized for EEZ surveillance and humanitarian aid, was paired with Ambassador Penone's assertive rhetoric positioning France as a "resident Indo Pacific power" with obligations of geography rather than a visiting European partner (Dangwal 2025).

This suggests that some participants engage MNEK not primarily for confidence building but for identity projection asserting strategic status through the act of inclusion in a prestigious multilateral gathering. The Musyawarah framework accommodates this: inclusive design creates the platform on which identity claims can be made, meaning identity projection is a supplementary benefit of the framework rather than a rival explanation of participation.

Second, Russia and China deployed modern high capability combatants Steregushchiy class corvettes with Kalibr capable vertical launch systems (Russia) and a Type 052D destroyer equipped with advanced phased array radar and YJ 18 anti ship missiles (China) within a nominally humanitarian exercise (Dangwal 2025). This creates a visible tension between the exercise's soft power framing and participants' hard power signals. The tension does not invalidate the Al Ta'awwun framing mechanism; it confirms instead that political cost

reduction operates selectively sufficiently low to permit participation, but not so complete as to prevent participants from simultaneously projecting capability within the permissive environment Indonesia has constructed. This anomaly is addressed further in the Discussion.

Discussion

1. Musyawarah (Consultative Consensus Building)

Musyawarah, as discussed earlier, is the practice of deliberation to achieve consensus, deeply ingrained in Indonesian political culture and ASEAN diplomatic style (Stubbs 2019). In constructivist terms, Musyawarah constitutes, in constructivist terms, a norm that prescribes inclusive, consensus oriented behavior as appropriate for Indonesia in multilateral settings. In the context of MNEK 2025, we see musyawarah's influence first in the very conception of a multilateral exercise open to all. Rather than restricting participation to allies or like minded states (which would be a more realist approach, emphasizing security blocs), Indonesia extended invitations to 56 countries including those with mutual suspicions (ANTARA 2024).

Such breadth of invitation aligns with a norm that all parties merit inclusion when addressing shared problems *should have a seat at the table* when addressing common issues. Admiral Ali's outreach even to countries that eventually did not send ships (e.g., North Korea was noted as invited, though it never participates (Dangwal 2025)) demonstrates an almost principle driven inclusivity.

This is musyawarah operationalized: no voice is deliberately excluded, so long as the discourse remains about peaceful cooperation. The Final Planning Conference snapshot, where planners from nations as incompatible as Russia and Ukraine apparently both had representation (Dangwal 2025), is a powerful symbol of this ethos. It suggests that Indonesia did not want to bar anyone – even parties currently at war – from joining a humanitarian dialogue, reflecting a belief that consultation can transcend conflict at least in this limited sphere. A realist lens might dismiss that as naïve, but constructivism allows us to see it as normative enactment: Indonesia behaving in line with what it *ought* to do given its identity as a neutral convener.

The evidence supports a plausible mechanism rather than a conclusive causal proof. Musyawarah is visible in the inclusive invitation protocol and planning conferences; Al Ta'awwun is visible in the humanitarian and civic action menu; political cost reduction is visible in calibrated asset selection and the absence of combat scenarios. Taken together, these elements suggest that Indonesia's design made participation easier for rival powers, but they do not exclude

reputational calculation, routine naval diplomacy, or strategic hedging as complementary explanations.

Indonesia's identity as a mediator and norm entrepreneur was bolstered by *musyawarah* driven behavior. The country has long seen itself (and been seen by others) as a natural leader in ASEAN and the Non Aligned Movement, due to its size and moderate, accommodating diplomatic style (Laksmana 2011). By successfully bringing the US and China, and Russia and Western nations, into cooperative activities, Indonesia enacted its role as an "honest broker" or at least a meeting ground. Identity in constructivism is performative: it is sustained by actions. MNEK 2025's inclusive and consensus oriented conduct thus reinforced Indonesia's self conception as a nation that can unify disparate parties for a common good. Each instance of collective decision making without conflict – say, agreeing on how mixed crew teams would operate in the MEDCAP, or the joint mangrove planting event – was an instance of practicing and thereby validating the *musyawarah* norm.

This reinforces the social identity among participants that *navies can be a community of practice focusing on cooperation*. Indeed, participants likely carried home an image of Indonesia as a country that provides a neutral ground and urges cooperation, potentially moderating threat perceptions. Such an effect is intangible but aligns with constructivist insights about *security communities* (Adler & Barnett 1998), where shared norms and trust gradually replace mere deterrence. While MNEK 2025 alone does not create a security community, it contributes one brick to that edifice by habituating navies to working together and seeing each other through a cooperative lens rather than solely a competitive one.

The findings position MNEK 2025 precisely within the scholarly conversations introduced in the Introduction. The study extends Cottey and Forster's (2004) taxonomy of defence diplomacy by identifying a category they did not anticipate: norm driven inclusive exercises convened by non aligned middle powers, distinct from both alliance building exercises (RIMPAC) and bilateral CBMs (Five Power Defence Arrangements). Cottey and Forster analyze defence diplomacy as an instrument of established powers; MNEK reveals it as an instrument through which a non aligned state generates diplomatic infrastructure that even great powers find useful. The findings challenge Laksmana's (2011) characterization of Indonesian defence posture as primarily reactive and constrained by domestic institutional fragmentation; MNEK 2025 demonstrates proactive, institutionally sophisticated design that produces outcomes beyond Indonesia's material capacity to

enforce. The study confirms Acharya's (2009) norm localization thesis by documenting precisely how localization operates in the defence diplomacy domain: the global practice of multilateral naval exercises is reconstituted through Musyawarah and Al Ta'awun, producing a format whose inclusive logic is genuinely alien to the alliance centric exercise tradition. Finally, the analysis complements Inkiriwang's (2021) foundational work on earlier MNEK iterations by providing the causal mechanism explanation that his descriptive account left open.

2. Al Ta'awun (Mutual Assistance in Good Works)

The principle of al ta'awun – to cooperate and assist one another in goodness – was palpably the moral heartbeat of MNEK 2025. From a constructivist viewpoint, al ta'awun functioned as a normative motivation that shaped Indonesia's preferences for what the exercise should accomplish. It effectively set the scope conditions: any activity included needed to reflect mutual benefit and aid, not competition or domination. This norm has both Islamic and secular humanitarian facets. Indonesian officials, particularly those with an Islamic background, likely view humanitarian assistance as not just a strategic imperative but a moral one.

For example, Admiral Ali's repeated references to helping neighbors in need and his exclamation "Alhamdulillah we can unite all navies... to work on operations other than war" (Parameswaran 2018) carry a tone of moral duty and thankfulness beyond mere strategic calculus. In the Quranic spirit of *ta'awun alal birr* (cooperating in goodness), the exercise's entire framing was that of a collective good deed: preparing together to save lives in disasters, and directly doing good through civic action.

How did this norm concretely drive actions? One direct way is in the selection of exercise scenario and tasks. Unlike a rationalist view that might say Indonesia chose HADR focus because it's low risk or because it yields reputational gains, a constructivist lens incorporating al ta'awun suggests Indonesia genuinely prioritized those activities seen as *virtuous* and beneficial. The extensive MEDCAP and ENCAP efforts are hard to explain by realism or even traditional institutionalism these provided no combat advantage, and they even diverted significant resources (e.g., a warship used as a hospital, engineers busy paving roads rather than enhancing war fighting skills). Yet they make perfect sense as an enactment of al ta'awun: the navies cooperated to directly assist communities, which is inherently valued in the norm set Indonesia espouses. The cost was justified by the value fulfillment, not by a material payoff. Indeed, Indonesia's Navy publicly framed those activities in terms of compassion and social responsibility(NusaBali

2025), language that resonates more with ethical norms than strategic logic.

Beyond design constraint, *al ta'awun* helps explain the absence of competitive elements. If mutual aid is the guiding star, then anything that smacks of showing off military might or maneuvering against someone would violate the exercise ethos. Constructively, Indonesia defined appropriate behavior for participants: warships were there to collaborate, not to impress or intimidate. Anecdotal evidence from participants supports this – sailors commented that the atmosphere was “more like a humanitarian mission than a wargame,” and that even interactions between US and Russian crews were cordial, focused on sharing techniques for disaster response (Dangwal 2025).

The usual undercurrent of rivalry present in many multinational exercises was consciously suppressed. We can see this as a case of *normative reframing*: Indonesia essentially invited other navies to step out of a realist paradigm and temporarily into a different role – as *fellow helpers* rather than potential combatants. Many navies, having dual mandates that include military operations other than war, were willing to play along because those norms of humanitarian assistance are also part of their professional ethos (for example, the US Navy has “Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower” that elevates HADR operations). Constructivism would highlight that Indonesia managed to activate a shared identity among participants: *we are all humanitarians at sea*. This shared identity was reinforced symbolically by actions like the joint mangrove planting and collective medical camps, which created a sense of common human purpose. In essence, the practice of *al ta'awun* during MNEK 2025 may have fostered what social theorists call a “*we feeling*” (Deutsch 1957) at least temporarily among the multinational participants, as they engaged in shared good deeds.

At the policy level, Indonesia's adherence to *al ta'awun* is institutionalized in its doctrine of naval diplomacy. Indonesian law mandates the Navy to conduct diplomatic tasks in support of foreign policy, particularly in cooperative efforts for humanitarian purposes (ANTARA 2025a). This legal directive (Law No. 34/2004 on TNI) itself reflects the normative stance that the military has a role in peace and humanitarian outreach. Admiral Ali explicitly cited this law when describing MNEK's purpose: “*one of the main tasks of the Navy is naval diplomacy to support foreign policy, which includes disaster mitigation and humanitarian operations*” (ANTARA 2025a). The alignment of the exercise with a domestic legal normative framework shows the depth of internalization of these norms in Indonesian

institutions – a hallmark of constructivist processes where international role conceptions get embedded in domestic identity (Aggestam 2006).

3. Alternative explanations and bounded inference

Realist and liberal institutionalist explanations remain relevant but incomplete. A realist reading can interpret MNEK as hedging or soft balancing: Indonesia keeps all major powers engaged so none can treat the exercise as an anti bloc signal. A liberal institutionalist reading can explain repeated interaction, information sharing, and absolute gains from HADR cooperation. The evidence, however, shows that these explanations work best when combined with the normative design logic. The exercise did not merely create interaction; it created interaction under non combat, humanitarian, and inclusive rules that made co presence politically acceptable.

Musyawarah and *Al Ta'awwun* enrich the constructivist account because they specify the local content of Indonesia's norm entrepreneurship rather than treating cooperation as a generic liberal outcome. Their effect is bounded by scope conditions: Indonesia's credible non alignment, the exclusion of combat domains, the availability of humanitarian tasks, and repeated interaction across MNEK iterations. The single case design means the paper should not claim general causality. It should claim that MNEK 2025 offers a theoretically useful case of how locally embedded norms can inform military diplomatic design under great power rivalry.

Conclusion

MNEK 2025 shows that Indonesia's norm informed naval diplomacy can help lower participation barriers for rival great powers, but the evidence does not support a deterministic claim that *Musyawarah* and *Al Ta'awwun* were necessary or sufficient causes of United States, Chinese, and Russian participation. The case is better read as a bounded instance in which Indonesia's institutional design, credible non alignment, humanitarian framing, and the low sensitivity character of OMOTW activities combined to make simultaneous great power attendance politically easier.

Musyawarah helps explain the exercise's inclusive invitation logic and iterative planning structure, while *Al Ta'awwun* helps explain why the exercise centered on humanitarian assistance, civic action, and non traditional maritime security rather than combat signaling. These norms did not replace material interests, reputational incentives, or strategic calculation. They shaped the diplomatic environment in which those interests could be pursued at lower political cost. The theoretical

contribution is therefore more modest and more defensible: MNEK 2025 illustrates how non Western deliberative and cooperative traditions can inform the design of inclusive security practices in a contested regional order.

The study remains limited by its single case design and reliance on public documentary evidence. It cannot establish how far foreign participants internalized Indonesia's normative framing, nor can it prove that similar designs would succeed under different host state conditions. Future research should compare MNEK with other multilateral naval exercises, examine participant perceptions through interviews or archival sources, and test whether repeated non combat interaction improves coordination in actual disaster responses. The central finding remains clear: Indonesia's design did not overcome great power rivalry, but it created a temporary institutional space in which cooperation across rivalry became more feasible.

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