

Port Visits as Instruments of Defense Diplomacy: The Case of KRI dr. Wahidin Sudirohusodo-991's South Pacific Mission (2024)

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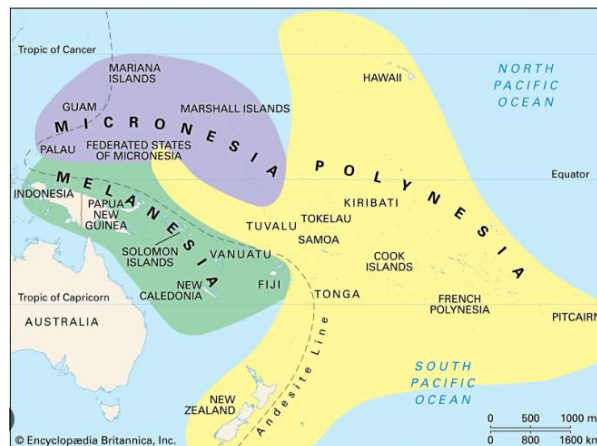
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Abstract: *The South Pacific region holds strategic significance for Indonesia due to its geographical proximity to the east part of Indonesia especially Papua, its Melanesian cultural connections, and the increasing geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. Amid challenges related to perceptions of the Papua issue and the need to strengthen relations with Pacific countries, Indonesia conducted the South Pacific Port Visit Mission 2024 using KRI dr. Wahidin Sudirohusodo-991 to Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea. This article aims to analyze how the port visit utilized as an instrument of Indonesia's defense diplomacy and its implications for Indonesia's interests in the South Pacific. This study employs a descriptive qualitative descriptive method through literature review, official documents, activity reports, local media coverage, and interviews with the Commander of the 2024 Port Visit Task Force and the Commander of KRI WSH-991. The findings show that the port visit served as a means of defense diplomacy through courtesy calls, official meetings, open ship activities, and military engagement. In addition, health services, medical aid, cultural promotion, culinary diplomacy, and social service activities strengthened Indonesia's soft power dimension. This mission is important because it demonstrates a peaceful, humanitarian, and relevant defense approach to strengthening Indonesia's image and engagement in the South Pacific.*

INTRODUCTION

The South Pacific is an island region spread across the southern part of the Pacific Ocean, encompassing countries such as Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, Tonga, Samoa, Kiribati, Palau, Tuvalu, etc. This region has a vast maritime space, rich cultural diversity, and a strategic position within interconnected oceanic routes (Pacific Islands Forum, 2022; West, 2026). The following picture shows the map of the South Pacific region:



Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica (2026)

As shown in the map, the South Pacific region directly borders Indonesia, particularly in the eastern part of Indonesia, between Papua and South Papua Provinces and the state of Papua New Guinea. The South Pacific is divided into three geographical regions, namely Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia (Suroto, 2017). Nesia means island, micro means very small, melano means black, and poly means many.

The South Pacific region in recent years has increasingly occupied an important position in the dynamics of international relations. In addition to facing various development challenges, climate change, and vulnerability to natural disasters, the region has also become a space of increasingly intensive interaction for various external actors seeking to strengthen their political, economic, and strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific region (Herindrasti et al., 2025; Reuters, 2024). In this context, Pacific island countries are no longer viewed as peripheral actors in the international system, but rather as strategic partners in various regional and global agendas. For Indonesia, the South Pacific holds particular importance due to its geographical proximity to eastern Indonesia, as well as its historical and cultural connections with Melanesian communities across the region (Wardhani, 2023). Therefore, relations with South Pacific countries have increasingly become an important part of the implementation of Indonesia's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region.

Indonesia's increasing attention to the South Pacific region is reflected in the launch of the Pacific Elevation vision in 2019. Indonesia seeks to strengthen partnerships with Pacific countries through an approach that emphasizes the spirit of partnership, a consultative process, and inclusive engagement across various areas of cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, 2019). The implementation of Pacific Elevation has been realized through various development cooperation programs, including capacity building, education, health, disaster mitigation, and climate change. Through these initiatives, Pacific Elevation has developed into a key strategic framework used by Indonesia to expand its engagement and increase its contribution in the South Pacific region (Herindrasti et al., 2025).

Despite efforts to strengthen relations with the South Pacific region, Indonesia's relations with South Pacific countries continue to face several challenges. Various studies show that the Papua issue remains one of the factors influencing the perceptions of some Pacific countries toward Indonesia and periodically appears in various regional and international forums (Mahroza et al., 2023; Wardhani, 2023). In addition, the growing attention of various external actors toward the Pacific region has created an increasingly dynamic and competitive diplomatic environment (Herindrasti et al., 2025). This condition encourages Indonesia to continue expanding and deepening its relations with Pacific countries through various instruments that can strengthen communication, build trust, and broaden spaces for cooperation across different sectors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, 2026).

In its efforts to strengthen these relations, Indonesia does not only rely on political diplomacy and development cooperation, but also utilizes various other instruments involving actors and institutions beyond the ministry of foreign affairs. The development of contemporary international relations practice shows that activities involving defense institutions during peacetime are increasingly used to support foreign

policy objectives, strengthen relations between states, and build trust among the actors involved (Drab, 2018). At the same time, social, cultural, and humanitarian activities have also become increasingly important as means to build closeness and create positive perceptions of a country within its external environment (Wardhani, 2023). Therefore, defense diplomacy and soft power serve as relevant perspectives for understanding various forms of Indonesia's engagement in the South Pacific that involve both defense institutions and civil society.

One form of this engagement was realized through the implementation of the South Pacific Port Visit Mission from 9 October to 25 November 2024 using KRI dr. Wahidin Sudirohusodo-991 (KRI WSH-991). The mission was conducted in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Vanuatu as part of Indonesia's efforts to strengthen relations with South Pacific countries through various activities involving the government, relevant institutions, and local communities. This port visit also included various activities aimed at supporting the strengthening of bilateral relations and expanding Indonesia's interaction with communities in the destination countries (Mawangi, 2024). These characteristics show that the port visit was not merely a ship visit, but also a form of engagement that connected the dimension of inter-state relations with broader interactions at the societal level.

Studies on Indonesia's relations with the South Pacific have developed in recent years, particularly those discussing Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in the South Pacific (Wardhani, 2023) and the implementation of Pacific Elevation as Indonesia's engagement strategy in the region (Herindrasti et al., 2025). However, research that specifically examines port visits as an instrument of Indonesia's defense diplomacy in the South Pacific remains relatively limited. In addition, most existing studies focus more on cultural diplomacy, development cooperation, and regional political dynamics, leaving a gap in understanding how port visits can be utilized as an instrument of defense diplomacy while also serving as a means to build relations with governments and communities in the destination countries.

Based on this gap, this article aims to analyze how the Port Visit Mission of KRI WSH-991 was utilized as an instrument of Indonesia's defense diplomacy in the South Pacific in 2024. Specifically, this study addresses two research questions: How did the Port Visit Mission of KRI WSH-991 serve as an instrument of Indonesia's defense diplomacy in the South Pacific in 2024? and What were the implications of the mission for Indonesia's interests in the South Pacific? To answer these research questions, this article employs the perspectives of defense diplomacy and soft power.

Defense Diplomacy

Defense diplomacy is one of the instruments of foreign policy that utilizes defense resources, institutions, and activities during peacetime to support the achievement of a state's political and security objectives. Unlike the use of military force, which is coercive in nature, defense diplomacy emphasizes the use of defense institutions as a means to build trust, increase transparency, strengthen relations, and promote security cooperation between states (Cottey & Forster, 2004). From this perspective, military power is not positioned as an instrument of coercion, but rather as an instrument of engagement used to develop more constructive relations among the states involved.

According to Cottey and Forster (2004), defense diplomacy includes various non-combat military activities conducted during peacetime, such as visits by defense officials, military personnel exchanges, education and training, joint exercises, technical assistance, and warship visits or port visits. These activities function as confidence-building measures that enable states to improve communication, build mutual understanding, strengthen cooperation in the fields of defense and security, and pursue its interests. In this context, port visits are one form of defense diplomacy that allows interaction between the defense institutions of the sending state and the receiving state through various official and non-official activities (Chaer et al., 2021).

Soft Power

In addition to defense diplomacy, this study also uses the concept of soft power to explain various non-military activities carried out during the port visit mission. The concept of soft power was introduced by Nye to explain a state's ability to influence the behavior of others through attraction rather than coercion or payments (Nye, 2004). From this perspective, a state can gain influence not only through military and

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economic power, but also through values, culture, policies, and various forms of interaction that can create positive perceptions in the eyes of others.

According to Nye, the main sources of soft power come from culture, political values, and foreign policies that are considered legitimate and attractive in the eyes of the international community. Therefore, activities such as cultural exchanges, humanitarian assistance, educational cooperation, and direct interaction with local communities can become important instruments in building a state's image and influence. In this context, culture does not only function as a national identity, but also as a means to build closeness, increase mutual understanding, and strengthen relations with communities in other countries (Wardhani, 2023). Thus, the concept of soft power is relevant and plays a role in building closeness with communities in the destination countries.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach to analyze the implementation of the South Pacific Port Visit Mission of KRI WSH-991 as an instrument of Indonesia's defense diplomacy in the South Pacific in 2024. The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to understand the process, forms of activities, and context of the mission's implementation within Indonesia's relations with South Pacific countries. The focus of this study is directed toward identifying the forms of defense diplomacy carried out through the port visit and its implications for Indonesia's interests in the region.

The research data were obtained through literature study and interviews. The literature study was conducted by examining various relevant sources, including official government documents, mission implementation reports, books, journal articles, academic articles, and other publications related to defense diplomacy, soft power, and Indonesia's relations with the South Pacific. This study also uses primary data obtained through semi-structured interviews with the Commander of the 2024 South Pacific Port Visit Mission and the Commander of KRI dr. Wahidin Sudirohusodo-991, as well as information obtained by the author during the 2026 Port Visit Coordination Meeting in Surabaya. The collected data were then analyzed descriptively to identify the implementation of defense diplomacy through the port visit and its implications for Indonesia's interests in the South Pacific region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strategic Context of the 2024 South Pacific Mission

The South Pacific region has an increasingly prominent strategic position in the dynamics of the contemporary Indo-Pacific, as the region faces various challenges related to development, climate change, health, connectivity, and disaster resilience. In the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, Pacific countries place human security, climate change, disaster resilience, sustainable development, and ocean governance as the region's main priorities (Pacific Islands Forum, 2022). Therefore, the South Pacific can no longer be understood as a peripheral region, but rather as a strategic space where security, development, environmental, and diplomatic agendas intersect.

The importance of this region has further increased as the South Pacific has become an arena for the engagement of various external actors. Australia, Japan, the United States, and China have increasingly strengthened their presence through development assistance, security cooperation, infrastructure diplomacy, and various forms of bilateral and multilateral partnerships. According to a Lowy Institute report cited by Reuters, the Pacific region is strategically valuable because its location is important for monitoring and controlling naval movements in the Pacific Ocean (Reuters, 2024). This competition will certainly have implications for Indonesia, which directly borders this region, making it important for Indonesia to be present and contribute to maintaining stability in the region (Herdiana, 2026).

For Indonesia, the South Pacific has direct relevance due to its geographical proximity to eastern Indonesia, especially Papua, as well as its historical and cultural connections with Melanesian communities. These connections make the South Pacific not only an external space in Indonesia's foreign policy, but also a region related to issues of identity, perception, and national interest. Wardhani (2023) explains that

Indonesia uses a cultural approach in its engagement with the South Pacific to strengthen relations with South Pacific communities and build a more positive understanding of Indonesia. In line with this, the Directorate of Pacific and Oceanian Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in its presentation at the 2026 port visit coordination meeting, emphasized that the Pacific is important for Indonesia due to geographical proximity as fellow archipelagic regions, as well as shared culture, challenges, and development opportunities with Pacific countries, making it necessary to jointly create a peaceful, stable, and prosperous region (Dirpasaf Kemlu, 2026).

Indonesia's interests in the South Pacific are also related to the management of the Papua issue in regional and international forums (Sutomo, Dohamid, & Timur, 2022). Several Pacific countries, especially those with Melanesian solidarity, have paid attention to the Papua issue, making it one of Indonesia's diplomatic challenges in the region. Mahroza et al. (2023) explain that Indonesia uses economic, cultural, and defense diplomacy, including through the role of the Indonesian Navy, to gather support from South Pacific countries and mitigate the risk of the internationalization of the Papua issue. Thus, Indonesia's engagement in this region is not only directed at expanding development cooperation, but also at strengthening political communication, building trust, and reducing the space for misperceptions toward Indonesia.

In this context, the Pacific Elevation vision introduced by Indonesia in 2019 has become the main framework for strengthening Indonesia's engagement in the South Pacific. Through this vision, Indonesia seeks to strengthen relations with South Pacific countries through an approach that emphasizes the spirit of partnership, a consultative process, and inclusive engagement across various areas of cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, 2026). Herindrastiet et al (2025) argue that Pacific Elevation strengthens Indonesia's diplomatic position through equal and mutually beneficial partnerships, including in the areas of sustainable development, education, renewable energy, disaster mitigation, and cultural cooperation. Therefore, the 2024 South Pacific Port Visit Mission of KRI WSH-991 can be understood as part of Indonesia's expanded engagement in the South Pacific region through an instrument that combines the dimensions of defense diplomacy, humanitarianism, and socio-cultural interaction.

Overview of the 2024 South Pacific Port Visit Mission of KRI WSH-991

The 2024 South Pacific Port Visit Mission was carried out using KRI dr. Wahidin Sudirohusodo-991 as one of the main Indonesian Navy element in a diplomatic and humanitarian mission to the South Pacific region. The mission lasted for 48 days, from 9 October to 25 November 2024, involving 192 task force personnel and crew members of KRI WSH-991, including several university and senior high school students (Komando Armada Republik Indonesia, 2024). The destination countries visited were Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea. Officially, the mission was intended to strengthen defense diplomacy, establish good relations, carry a peace mission, realize confidence-building measures, and demonstrate Indonesia's presence in the South Pacific region (Ministry of Defense of Indonesia, 2024).

KRI dr. Wahidin Sudirohusodo-991 is one of the Indonesian Navy's newest hospital ships and is part of the Third Fleet Command (Herdiana, 2026). This ship has a strategic character because it combines military functions, maritime operational support, and humanitarian capabilities. As a hospital ship, RI WSH-991 possesses medical capabilities comparable to a Type C hospital, with facilities that include polyclinics for general clinic/general practice clinic, dental clinic, ophthalmology clinic, ENT clinic, internal medicine clinic, OB-GYN clinic, surgical clinic, and maternal and child clinic. The ship is also equipped with an emergency room, operating rooms, inpatient wards, radiology facilities, X-ray and CT scan equipment, as well as isolation rooms. In addition, KRI WSH-991 has air medical mobility capabilities through the use of helicopters and sea-based medical mobility through ambulance boats and Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel (LCVP). These capabilities enable the vessel to support healthcare delivery and medical evacuation in archipelagic, coastal, and remote areas with limited health infrastructure (Dinas Penerangan Angkatan Laut, 2022). In terms of technical specifications, KRI WSH-991 is 124 meters long and 21.8 meters wide, with a personnel capacity of 647, including accommodation for 153 patients, and a cargo capacity of 115.5 tons for vehicles or goods (Herdiana, 2026). The ship is a product of the national defense industry, built by PT PAL Indonesia, and has been in service since 2022.

The selection of KRI WSH-991 as the main platform for the mission shows an alignment between Indonesia's diplomatic objectives and the needs of the destination countries. Based on an interview with the Commander of KRI WSH-991, the decision to use a hospital ship was made after considering the conditions in the South Pacific, particularly the limited health facilities in several destination countries. In planning the mission, the Indonesian Navy coordinated with the Ministry of Defense, embassies, defense attachés, and the Ministry of Health, especially regarding medical supplies and plans for social and health-related activities. Therefore, this mission was not merely ceremonial, but was designed to combine diplomatic activities, social interaction, and direct health services for local communities (Herdiana, 2026).

Various activities carried out during this mission included courtesy calls, official meetings, open ship activities, cocktail parties, joint sports activities, cultural programs, social services, health services, blood donation, and the delivery of medical aid (Irbianto, 2026). In this context, KRI WSH-991 served as a mobile diplomatic space that brought together government, military, and community elements. This character made the port visit of KRI WSH-991 different from a conventional warship visit, as the ship's presence not only represented defense capability, but also brought humanitarian benefits that could be directly felt by communities in the destination countries.

The Nexus between Port Visits and Defense Diplomacy

A port visit is one form of defense diplomacy because it is conducted through the peaceful use of military assets to build communication, trust, and cooperative relations with other countries, as explained by Cottey and Foster (2004). In defense diplomacy, the military is not only positioned as a coercive instrument, but also as a means of engagement to build communication, trust, and cooperation with other countries (Cottey & Forster, 2004; Drab, 2018). Therefore, port visits conducted by either warships or hospital ships can still be categorized as a practice of defense diplomacy as long as the activities are carried out by defense infrastructure or use military platforms, and are directed toward supporting the foreign policy objectives or national interests of the sending state. In the maritime context, port visits are important because naval vessels can function as representations of the state, symbols of strategic presence, and mobile diplomatic spaces that bring together government officials, military elements, and communities in the destination country (Herdiana, 2026; Marsetio, 2024).

Port visits are generally associated with warship visits to the ports of other countries. The study on the Indomalphi Port Visit by Chaer et al. (2021) shows that port visits can be part of a defense diplomacy strategy because they involve ship visits, courtesy calls, seminars, discussions, exercises, coordination, and information exchange to enhance security cooperation. In that study, port visits are understood as a means to realize confidence-building measures and strengthen defense cooperation capacity. Therefore, the main function of a port visit does not lie solely in the type of ship used, but rather in the use of defense elements to create strategic communication, strengthen trust, and expand inter-state relations.

The use of a hospital auxiliary ship in a port visit provides a distinctive character because it presents a more humanitarian and non-threatening face of the military. This kind of practice is not entirely new. The United States has used USNS Comfort in medical assistance missions in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as USNS Mercy in the Pacific Partnership in the Indo-Pacific, as part of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and regional partnership cooperation (Burkett, 2024; U.S. Southern Command, 2018). China has also used the hospital ships Peace Ark and Silk Road Ark in Harmonious Mission to various countries, including Pacific countries since 2014, to provide free medical services and strengthen relations with local communities (Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, 2023; Xinhua, 2025). These examples show that hospital ships can serve as a medium of defense diplomacy because they remain military assets, but operate through a humanitarian approach.

In Indonesia's case, the 2024 South Pacific Port Visit Mission used KRI dr. Wahidin Sudirohusodo-991 as an instrument of defense diplomacy that combined the presence of the Indonesian Navy, messages of friendship, and humanitarian services. The Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Indonesia (2024) stated that this mission aimed to conduct defense diplomacy, strengthen good relations, carry a peace mission, realize confidence-building measures, and demonstrate Indonesia's presence in the South Pacific region. Based on an interview with the Commander of KRI WSH-991, the 2024 port visit to the South Pacific was

the Indonesian Navy's first implementation of such a mission in the region, although port visits themselves have long been part of the Indonesian Navy's programs in various countries. The selection of a hospital ship was made by considering the conditions of the destination countries, particularly the limited health facilities, so that the mission was not merely ceremonial but also provided direct benefits to local communities (Herdiana, 2026)

The selection of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Vanuatu was also based on strategic considerations. These four countries are important in Indonesia's relations with the South Pacific, particularly in relation to regional perceptions of the Papua issue and their position within Melanesian dynamics (Herdiana, 2026). Papua New Guinea is important because it is Indonesia's direct neighboring country and one of the largest countries in the Pacific region. Fiji has strong political influence in the region and is often regarded as one of the important countries in South Pacific dynamics. Vanuatu has particular significance because it is one of the countries that most frequently raises the Papua issue in international forums, making it important for Indonesia to conduct an approach and show another side of Papua more concretely. One way this was done was by involving several indigenous Papuans in the mission so that they could interact with the communities and governments of the destination countries. This was expected to provide new perspectives for both sides. Meanwhile, Solomon Islands is also important because it is part of the Melanesian environment and the Pacific region, where influence is increasingly contested by various external actors. This explanation is in line with the interview with the Task Force Commander, who emphasized that the destination countries were selected because of their relevance to Indonesia's interests, both in the context of bilateral relations, the Papua issue, and the strategic position of the region (Irbianto, 2026). There was actually a plan to expand the number of countries visited; however, due to time and budget limitations at that time, only these four countries were selected for the 2024 port visit (Herdiana, 2026).

The implementation of the KRI WSH-991 port visit was then realized through several forms of defense diplomacy activities (Komando Armada Republik Indonesia, 2024). Courtesy calls were conducted with government officials and local authorities as a form of official respect as well as an opening for political and institutional communication. Military engagements were carried out through interaction with defense or security elements of the destination countries, although the forms varied because not all destination countries have a navy. Official meetings served as a space to strengthen bilateral relations, convey Indonesia's messages, and open opportunities for further cooperation. Meanwhile, ship visits or open ship activities allowed officials, security elements, and the public to directly observe the facilities of KRI WSH-991.

In addition to official meetings, military engagement was also carried out through joint sports activities between Task Force personnel and local military elements or government employees. Several forms of military engagement included the following (Komando Armada Republik Indonesia, 2024): In Fiji, the Task Force held a friendly football match with the Fiji Army as a means to build informal closeness with the host country's defense elements. In Papua New Guinea, joint sports activities were held between Task Force personnel, staff of the Indonesian Embassy in Port Moresby, and elements of the Papua New Guinea Defense Force. Meanwhile, in Vanuatu, because the country does not have armed forces or a regular military, engagement was conducted through a friendly football match with the team from the Vanuatu Ministry of Health. These variations of activities show that port visits can adjust the form of their interactions to the institutional structure of the destination country, whether through the military, security apparatus, or civilian government institutions. In the context of defense diplomacy, joint sports activities function as a means of confidence building, because they allow communication to take place in a more informal, fluid, and equal manner outside official forums.

Thus, KRI WSH-991 played a role not only as a military platform, but also as a diplomatic space that demonstrated the professionalism of the Indonesian Navy, the capability of Indonesia's defense industry, and Indonesia's peaceful orientation in building relations with South Pacific countries.

Soft Power Activities during the Mission

Beyond its role as an instrument of defense diplomacy, the 2024 South Pacific Port Visit Mission also displayed Indonesia's soft power dimension through culture, cuisine, health services, social activities,

and direct interaction with local communities. Soft power refers to a state's ability to build influence through attraction, culture, values, and policies that are perceived as legitimate, rather than through coercion or payments (Nye, 2004). In the KRI WSH-991 mission, soft power did not stand apart from defense diplomacy, but was embedded in the peaceful use of a military platform to present Indonesia's image as a friendly and humanitarian country with cultural closeness to South Pacific communities. Thus, the hospital ship served not only as defense infrastructure, but also as a medium of state representation that carried messages of humanity and friendship.

The cultural dimension was one of the important elements of this mission. During the 2024 Port Visit activities, the Indonesian Navy presented various forms of Indonesian arts, including the Saman Dance from Aceh, Reog Ponorogo from East Java, Pencak Silat skills, the Falabea Dance or War Dance from Papua, and the Yembo Dance from Papua (Dinas Penerangan Angkatan Laut, 2024). This cultural diversity reflected Indonesia's effort to present a plural national identity, ranging from the culture of western Indonesia to Papuan culture as a representation of eastern Indonesia. The inclusion of Papuan cultural elements was important because the mission was carried out in a region with Melanesian identity connections. In the context of Indonesia's relations with the South Pacific, a cultural approach can be used to build social closeness, broaden local communities' understanding of Indonesia, and reduce the perception gap that has long been influenced by the Papua issue (Wardhani, 2023).

Alongside with the cultural performances, Indonesian cuisine was also used as an instrument of soft power. During the National Reception, the Task Force served various Indonesian foods and beverages, such as satay, rawon, fried rice, soto, meatballs, traditional cakes, as well as international menus (Dinas Penerangan Angkatan Laut, 2024). The interview with the Commander of KRI WSH-991 showed that the cocktail party was a regular part of the port visit because it included invitations to local officials, cultural performances, and the introduction of Indonesian food (Herdiana, 2026). From a soft power perspective, this kind of diplomatic reception did not only function as a ceremonial event, but also as a social space that enabled informal communication, the building of familiarity, and direct experience of Indonesian culture. This is important because diplomatic relations are not only built through official meetings, but also through social atmospheres that create emotional closeness and positive impressions of the sending state.

The most concrete soft power dimension was seen through health services and humanitarian assistance. In Solomon Islands, the Task Force delivered medical aid from the Ministry of Health to the representatives of the Ministry of National Security of Solomon Islands, conducted blood donation activities on board KRI WSH-991 in cooperation with the Solomon Islands Red Cross, and provided general medical treatment for local residents and Indonesian citizens. The blood donation activity recorded 61 registrants, 57 donors, and 4 people who were rejected for health reasons, while the general medical treatment served 25 patients and X-ray services were provided to 2 people. In Fiji, health activities were not conducted in the form of general medical treatment, but through the handover of medical aid from the Ministry of Health to the Commander of the Fiji Navy at the Fiji Naval Base. In Vanuatu, health services were conducted over two days, covering general medical treatment, dental services, and medical check-ups, with a total of 133 patients. On the second day, health services remained open, with 218 patients receiving treatment, and the handover of medical aid from the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia to Vanuatu was also carried out-represented by the Minister of Health of Vanuatu. In Papua New Guinea, health services were also conducted over two days with a total of 330 patients, covering general medical services, dental services, medical check-ups, and radiology services in the form of X-rays and CT scans. On the second day, the handover of medical aid to PNG was also carried out and received by the Minister of Health of PNG (Komando Armada Republik Indonesia, 2024).

Community engagement was also carried out through social activities in public facilities. Based on the interview with the Commander of KRI WSH-991, although the social service activities in 2024 were still limited to painting or minor repairs at churches, such activities created opportunities for direct interaction between Task Force personnel and local communities. He explained that during the church repair activity in Papua New Guinea, local residents and church members were present and participated in helping, even bringing food and drinks, which showed a positive response and a spirit of mutual cooperation from the local community (Herdiana, 2026). The statement of the Port Visit Task Force Commander also

reinforces that social activities such as church painting were part of the effort to build direct relations with the community (Irbianto, 2026). Based on this explanation, community engagement in this mission did not only take the form of health assistance, but also direct, simple, and community-oriented social service activities that responded to local needs. The people-to-people contact established during this mission provided opportunities for strengthening relations and direct interaction with local communities in the South Pacific, especially in the countries visited.

The Impacts of the 2024 South Pacific Port Visit on Indonesia

The 2024 South Pacific Port Visit Mission had several implications for Indonesia, particularly in strengthening engagement with South Pacific countries. As mentioned previously, this mission was carried out as an effort to establish defense diplomacy relations, strengthen good relations, and bring a peace mission to countries in the South Pacific region (Ministry of Defense of Indonesia, 2024). In this context, the visits to Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea not only expanded Indonesia's diplomatic contacts, but also created direct interactions among Indonesian Navy elements, government officials, security institutions, local communities, and the Indonesian diaspora. Thus, the port visit functioned as an engagement mechanism that brought together defense diplomacy, humanitarian diplomacy, and people-to-people relations within one series of activities.

This mission also provided opportunities for Indonesia to project a positive image through local media attention and interactions with governments and communities in the destination countries. Positive acceptance from governments and local communities can be understood as an indication of favorable reception of the mission. In Fiji, the government viewed the visit of KRI WSH-991 as a momentum to strengthen bilateral relations and expand regional cooperation. Fiji's Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration, Tio Tikoduadua, in an interview with FBC News, emphasized the importance of strengthening diplomatic relations and cultural exchange with Indonesia (Prasad, 2024). This statement indicates that the Fijian government perceived the presence of KRI WSH-991 not merely as a military visit, but as a diplomatic instrument that contributed to regional stability and development.

A similar positive response was also evident in Vanuatu. The Government of Vanuatu expressed appreciation for the health assistance and medical supplies provided by Indonesia. Vanuatu's national media, VBTC News, reported that Indonesia handed over more than 30 packages of medical assistance to the Ministry of Health of Vanuatu to support the distribution of health logistics to several islands facing limited supplies of medicine. The Director of Planning at the Ministry of Health of Vanuatu, Samuel Posikai Tapo, stated that the assistance would greatly support the government in reaching island communities that have long faced challenges in accessing healthcare services (Mawa, 2024). The support of the Vanuatu government was also reflected in the presence of health officials during the medical service activities conducted by KRI WSH-991. Vanuatu Daily Post further showed that members of the community continued to come and seek medical services aboard the Indonesian hospital ship despite earlier criticism or skepticism toward the visit (Vanuatu Daily Post, 2024). This suggests that the health services provided by KRI WSH-991 served as an important instrument for creating direct and positive experiences of Indonesia amid the existence of negative perceptions or framing.

In Papua New Guinea, NBC PNG described the presence of KRI WSH-991 as a reflection of Indonesia's commitment to regional stability, regional cooperation, and humanitarian outreach (NBC PNG, 2024). The National also noted the enthusiasm of Port Moresby residents who came to receive free healthcare services aboard the ship (The National, 2024). These responses demonstrate a degree of public trust and acceptance toward the services provided, while also highlighting the need for healthcare services that can be accessed through a humanitarian approach. The impact of the mission, therefore, did not lie solely in the amount of assistance delivered, but also in the construction of a positive perception of Indonesia as a humane partner that cares for its neighboring countries in the region. In the Solomon Islands, national media highlighted the medical assistance and community activities carried out by the KRI WSH-991 port visit task force during in Honiara. Solomon Business Magazine reported that the Government of the Solomon Islands received medical assistance from Indonesia and welcomed the meeting between the Indonesian delegation and local senior officials (Iroga, 2024). Overall, the responses of governments and

communities in the destination countries indicate that an approach emphasizing humanitarian aspects and social interaction was able to generate positive perceptions. The participation and appreciation shown by the governments and societies of the host countries suggest that the presence of KRI WSH-991 not only succeeded in fulfilling the operational objectives of the mission, but also contributed to enhancing Indonesia's image as a partner that is attentive to human security and community welfare in the South Pacific region.

In relation to the Papua issue, this mission needs to be placed as part of Indonesia's broader engagement with South Pacific countries, rather than as a single factor that directly changed the positions of countries in the region. Referring to the statement made by the Indonesian Ambassador to Australia and Vanuatu during the 2026 Port Visit Coordination Meeting, he noted that, following the 2024 Port Visit, Vanuatu, which had previously raised the Papua issue consistently at the United Nations General Assembly, has not brought up the issue again in that forum to date. Although in regional forums such as the MSG (Melanesian Spearhead Group) and the PIF (Pacific Islands Forum), the West Papua issue has remained under discussion, its mention and discussion have also shifted to become more cautious. The 2025 Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Leaders' Summit and the 2025 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting continued to include West Papua on the regional agenda, but the forum leaders also reaffirmed recognition of Indonesia's sovereignty over Papua while encouraging attention to human rights issues among fellow Melanesian communities (Department of Prime Minister and National Executive Council of PNG, 2025; Rabonu, 2025; Toito'ona, 2025). The 2024 Port Visit Mission of KRI WSH-991 cannot be said to have directly changed the attitudes of South Pacific countries toward Indonesia. However, the port visit became one important instrument that complemented Indonesia's approach by presenting a more tangible image of Indonesia to local communities and provided an opportunity to address existing misperceptions that had long been embedded among South Pacific societies.

Another implication of this mission was the increased visibility of the national defense industry's capabilities. KRI WSH-991 is a hospital auxiliary ship built by PT PAL Indonesia and is one of the domestically produced vessels that strengthens the Indonesian Navy (Dinas Penerangan Angkatan Laut, 2022). By bringing KRI WSH-991 to the South Pacific region, Indonesia not only demonstrated the operational capabilities of the Indonesian Navy, but also showed the capacity of the national defense industry to produce non-combat military platforms that can be used for humanitarian missions. The presence of this ship was important because it showed that Indonesia's defense products can function as instruments of diplomacy, not only as defense tools in the conventional sense.

Furthermore, this mission had implications for Indonesia's efforts to communicate its narrative on Papua. Several studies show that the Papua issue remains one of the challenges in Indonesia's relations with South Pacific countries (Mahroza et al., 2023; Wardhani, 2023). The Port Visit Task Force Commander explained that one of the considerations behind this mission was the importance of presenting a more tangible face of Indonesia to Pacific communities, including by involving personnel or participants from Papua so that they could interact directly with communities in the destination countries (Irbianto, 2026). Meanwhile, the Commander of KRI WSH-991 stated that in Vanuatu, negative framing toward the ship visit had emerged, but public responses became positive after people directly saw the facilities and health services provided (Herdiana, 2026). Therefore, this mission cannot be understood as a single solution to the Papua issue, but rather as part of Indonesia's strategic communication to reduce misperceptions and broaden South Pacific communities' understanding of Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

The 2024 South Pacific Port Visit Mission of KRI dr. Wahidin Sudirohusodo-991 shows that a port visit can serve as an instrument of Indonesia's defense diplomacy in the South Pacific region. This mission not only represented the presence of the Indonesian Navy through a military platform, but also presented a non-coercive approach that emphasized communication, confidence building, and cooperation with the destination countries. Through courtesy calls, official meetings, open ship activities, military engagement, joint sports activities, and interactions with governments and communities, KRI WSH-991 served as a mobile diplomatic space that brought together defense elements, government institutions, and civil society.

In addition, the use of a hospital ship gave this mission a strong humanitarian character. Health services, blood donation, the delivery of medical aid, cultural promotion, Indonesian cuisine, and social service activities demonstrated Indonesia's soft power dimension, which was oriented toward providing direct benefits to local communities. Local media responses and public enthusiasm in Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands show that this mission also helped build Indonesia's image as a peaceful, humane, and friendly partner. Although it cannot be claimed as a single factor that influenced the dynamics of inter-state relations or changed the perspectives and positions of South Pacific countries on the Papua issue, this mission became an important part of Indonesia's broader engagement to reduce misperceptions, improve its image, strengthen bilateral relations, and demonstrate the capacity of Indonesia's national defense industry.

The author offers several recommendations for future port visits to the South Pacific. First, port visits need to be strengthened through knowledge-sharing activities that introduce eastern Indonesia, particularly Papua, in a more substantive and contextual manner through activities such as discussions or seminars. These activities can involve more indigenous Papuans and present Papuan officials or figures as speakers so that dialogue can be conducted in a more real, inclusive, and balanced manner. Second, the implementation of the mission needs to be supported by more effective cross-ministerial coordination, including a proportional distribution of resources and budgetary support among the relevant ministries and institutions. Third, the addition of health personnel and the expansion of social service activities are also important to further strengthen contact with local communities and provide greater benefits. Finally, the involvement of local media needs to be designed more strategically so that they can gain direct experience of Indonesia's mission, helping them obtain new perspectives and produce more balanced reporting.

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