

Small State Security in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape: Strategic Choices for Brunei Darussalam

Dayangku Dr. Noor Hasharina binti Pengiran Haji Hassan, Muhammad Faiz Safwan bin Mohammad Nazri, Hajah Siti Diana binti Haji Othman & Siti Nurnabilah binti Haji Abdul Rahman

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2025

Defence and Strategic Analyses

DEFENCE AND STRATEGIC ANALYSES

2025



**SULTAN HAJI HASSANAL BOLKIAH
INSTITUTE OF DEFENCE AND STRATEGIC STUDIES**

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Perpustakaan Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei

Pengkatalogan Data-dalam-Penerbitan (Cataloguing-in-Publication)

DEFENCE and strategic analyses 2025. -- Bandar Seri Begawan : Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Ministry of Defence, 2026.

49 pages ; cm.

ISBN 978-99917-36-83-9 (paperback)

1. National security -- ASEAN -- Forecasting 2. National security -- International cooperation 3. ASEAN -- Politics and government 4. Artificial intelligence -- Military applications 5. Defense industries -- ASEAN

I. Brunei Darussalam. Ministry of Defence. Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies

Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2026

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First published: 2026

ISBN: 978-99917-36-83-9

Printed and bound in Brunei Darussalam by: EZY Printing

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Defence and Strategic Analyses (DSA)

The Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (SHHBIDSS) is a policy research think tank under the ambit of the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF), Brunei Darussalam. The institute supports and strengthens policy planning in the MINDEF and the Royal Brunei Armed Forces (RBAF) by providing research and analysis on defence, security and the strategic environment.

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This DSA 2025 is based on commentaries by SHHBIDSS researcher in Track 2 engagements in the region, including in the Track II Network of ASEAN Defence and Security Institutions (NADI) and their own papers that review and assess the various regional security developments and challenges.

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1. Small State Security in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape: Strategic Choices for Brunei Darussalam¹

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Abstract

In an era defined by multipolarity, great power rivalry, and complex security challenges, small states including Brunei face unique vulnerabilities and opportunities. Small states must navigate economic dependencies, geopolitical flashpoints, and emerging non-traditional threats through a nuanced, flexible strategy. This paper explores the evolving global order, the specific security challenges confronting small states, and outlines strategic choices for Brunei including defence diplomacy, strategic balancing, multilateralism, and resilience-building in non-traditional security domains. The analysis highlights how Brunei can maintain strategic autonomy and safeguard its sovereignty in a volatile international environment.

1.1 Introduction

The contemporary geopolitical landscape is marked by significant shifts from the rise of multipolarity and middle powers to an increasing focus on non-traditional security threats such as climate change, pandemics, and cybersecurity. Small states, often constrained by limited resources and diplomatic reach, must nevertheless assert their place and protect their interests amid these complexities. Small states are defined based on multifaceted characteristics including population size, territorial extent or geographical, and economic capacity. Timilsana (2024: 139) employs a more objective approach using measurable and physical criteria where a small state is a “sovereign state with a relatively small population, territory, and economy and is often disadvantaged in the international arena due to its limited resources, including military

¹ The commentary was presented to participants of Command Staff College Course hosted by Defence Academy, Royal Brunei Armed Forces (RBAF).

and economic strength.” The Commonwealth Secretariat defines small states as those with populations of 1.5 million or fewer, while the World Bank considers countries with populations under 10 million and high political stability as small states (Rabby, 2015; 2023). Small states can be found in various regions e.g. Swaziland and Botswana in Africa, Greenland and Iceland in Europe, Qatar in the Middle East, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam in Southeast Asia, Bahamas and Trinidad & Tobago in the Caribbean and Tuvalu and Fiji in the South Pacific. Table 1 shows the population size, income and land sizes of small states may vary. Some of the small states have income higher than bigger sized states or countries. Similarly, the military personnel size does not necessary correlate with land area or geographical.

There is no direct correlation between land cover size with income level as Singapore with the smaller land size (735 km sq) has higher population size, income per capita and military personnel compared to Brunei. Singapore has smaller land size, nearly half the total population of UAE, but a higher income per capita. Interestingly, Singapore’s military personnel are comparable (93%) to UAE.

Small State / Country	Land Area (km sq)	Population Size	GNI per capita (USD)	Military Personnel (Active)	Strategic Focus
Tuvalu	26	11,500	6,344	0	Environmental diplomacy & maritime sovereignty
Singapore	735	6.11 million	126,190	59,000	Technological superiority & "Total Defence"
Brunei	5,265	469,000	92,750	8,000	Resource-backed stability & bilateral pacts
UAE	83,600	11.57 million	81,530	63,000	Regional power projection & elite forces

Table 1: Comparative Indicators of Small States: Population, Income, and Land Size [Adapted from: Global Military.net (2025), Gulf News (2026), National Population and Talent Division (2026), The Cove (2025), World Bank Group (2026). Wikipedia contributors. (2026)]

Small states are often characterised by their relative lack of power, their limited ability to influence global or regional affairs, and their particular vulnerabilities in the international system (Stănescu, 2024, p. 307). In addition, medium and to a certain extent large country have applied a more intersubjective approach in defining small state and perceive themselves as part of small states in global dialogues platforms. The concept of a small state is socially constructed and inherently contentious, which presents challenges in reaching a consensus on its definition (Theys, 2022). Moreover, this definition is often subject to fluctuations in perception and context over time. According to Wivel (2023) small states are commonly perceived as rule-takers, not rule-makers. Additionally, they are characterised as security consumers rather than security producers. To mitigate the risk of conflict, these states often adopt a policy of neutrality as a strategic approach.

However, in contemporary contexts, smaller size such as land size, population size or military personnel size of a state, that are quantifiable, may not inherently pose a disadvantage for smaller nations. The emergence of new threats and the complexities of grey zones have provided opportunities for these states to capitalise on their unique strengths. For example, Singapore through their Total Defence approach has significantly enhanced its international standing and defence capabilities through its strong economic performance, adept diplomacy, and a dedicated emphasis on research and innovation.

Brunei is positioned strategically near the South China Sea and dependent on energy exports, exemplifies the challenges and strategic imperatives small states face today. For Brunei Darussalam, security is no longer shaped solely by traditional military considerations, but by a complex interplay of geopolitical competition, economic vulnerability and non-traditional risks. The manner in which Brunei Darussalam formulates and implements its strategic approach against today's evolving security threats will therefore be pivotal to maintaining its sovereignty, security and economic wellbeing. This paper examines the experiences of small states in an era when the dynamics of geopolitical shift changes all the time and the security strategies employed by small states. The paper will identify the geopolitical changes occurring globally, situating small states and the security challenges and strategic choices they

face. Building on this broader analysis, the paper then considers the case of Brunei Darussalam, examining the strategic choices it may pursue to safeguard its sovereignty, security and economic wellbeing.

1.2 Shifting Geopolitical Order and a Multipolar World

There is a growing perception that the international system is becoming multipolar, or that the transition towards such an order is already underway. In general terms, multipolarity refers to a world order in which power and influence are distributed among multiple states or centres, rather than dominated by a single hegemon or bipolar rivalry.

If a multipolar world has indeed emerged, the distribution of power appears to have expanded beyond major powers like the United States (US), China and Russia, to include middle powers such as Australia, Brazil and Indonesia. At the institutional level, the expanding BRICS similarly reflects this shift, offering an alternative platform to established institutions that are perceived to align more with Western interests.

Within this evolving order, small states occupy an ambiguous position. While they possess limited capacity to shape global outcomes independently, they are increasingly affected by the spillover effects of great-power competition. In response, small states have remained steadfast advocates of multilateralism through active engagement in international institutions and the promotion of international law, including recourse to mechanisms such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Small states have also demonstrated influence by convening and shaping diplomatic and security dialogues, as illustrated by Singapore's annual hosting of the Shangri-La Dialogue and its establishment of the Forum of Small States (FOSS). Mediation has emerged as another avenue for small-state relevance, including Qatar's role in facilitating Israel-Hamas negotiations during the war in Gaza which highlights how diplomatic credibility and neutrality can translate into strategic influence.

Despite the uncertainties associated with a multipolar world, these examples suggest that small states can continue to enhance their international standing by reinforcing global governance norms while carefully managing their exposure to geopolitical rivalry.

1.2.1 Growing Traditional and Non-Traditional Security Threats (NTS)

Traditional security remains centred on protecting states from military threats arising from major power competition, wars and conflicts. The geostrategic rivalry between the US and China continues to shape global security and economic dynamics, with little indication of sustained de-escalation. Simultaneously, the international system is experiencing an unprecedented level of armed conflict and violence since the end of World War II, as demonstrated by the war in Gaza, the 12-day Israel-Iran war, the Russia-Ukraine war and the Sudanese civil war.

Although the Asia-Pacific region remains comparatively peaceful, it is not immune to instability. The protracted crisis in Myanmar, periodic tensions along the Thailand-Cambodia border, and enduring flashpoints in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea underscore the region's latent volatility. Collectively, these conflicts and flashpoints reinforce concerns about the normalisation of military, coercive, or violent means as instruments of statecraft.

Alongside traditional threats, states are increasingly compelled to recalibrate their strategies to address a broad spectrum of non-traditional security (NTS) threats. These include climate change, health crises and pandemics, food insecurity, cybersecurity and technology-driven threats, terrorism, and transnational organised crime. Unlike traditional threats, NTS challenges are often transboundary in nature and cannot be addressed through military means alone.

Within this 'new' security landscape, conventional military responses alone are insufficient. Instead, countries are compelled to pursue and adopt a comprehensive approach to security that combines the use of military force with political, economic, social, and humanitarian responses. This approach is particularly salient for small states whose geographic vulnerabilities and resource constraints (including limited military capability) can magnify the impact of evolving security threats. By pursuing a comprehensive approach, small states can place greater emphasis on diplomacy, leverage their memberships in regional and international institutions, and utilise economic and non-military tools to offset both military and structural limitations.

1.2.2 Economic Trade War

The tariff policies of US President Donald Trump have sent shockwaves through the global economy and has strained international trade relations. The re-escalation of the

US-China trade war, which began in 2018 raised questions on the reliability of the US as a global economic partner, while reinforcing perceptions of economic statecraft as a strategic tool.

Beyond economic implications, tariffs also carry indirect security consequences. In security, tariffs can potentially affect the ability of countries to purchase military products, including from the US where tariffs may cause the cost of US products to rise. As a result, countries such as US allies may be encouraged to explore other defence partners and suppliers for military procurements. There is also the belief that President Trump will or has utilised tariffs as a negotiating tool against both US allies and adversaries alike to extract concessions on a wider set of issues – be it on economic or security, and regardless of whether the issue is big or small.

Amidst this environment, China may seek to capitalise on perceptions of US unilateralism by portraying itself as a responsible economic partner. Some countries may find appeal in leaning closer to China, especially to derive more economic opportunities with the latter. Such a move, however, carries the risk of entering into an unbalanced economic relationship with Beijing. For small states, including Brunei Darussalam, the strategic challenge lies in maintaining balance, avoiding overreliance on any single major power, while preserving economic flexibility. Diplomacy, negotiation and diversification of partnerships therefore remain critical tools in navigating an intensifying trade war.

1.3 Security Challenges for Small States

As the geopolitical interests of major powers increasingly converge in the Asia-Pacific, small states like Brunei Darussalam are becoming more strategically relevant despite their limited material capabilities. However, this heightened relevance is accompanied by distinct vulnerabilities that require careful and deliberate management.

1.3.1 Divergent Military Postures and Strategic Constraints

As illustrated in Table 1, small states do not exhibit uniform military capabilities, but rather demonstrate a spectrum of defence postures shaped by resources, threat perceptions and strategic priorities. States such as Singapore and the UAE have developed relatively advanced and well-resourced forces, enabling technological sophistication and, to a limited extent, power projection. In contrast, states such as Brunei Darussalam maintain more modest forces oriented towards territorial defence

and stability, while others such as Tuvalu rely almost entirely on non-military approaches to security.

Despite this variation, a common feature among small states is the presence of relative military constraints, particularly in terms of scale, sustainment and strategic depth when compared to larger powers. Even more capable small states face limitations in maintaining prolonged operations or independently deterring major threats. As a result, military capability alone is rarely sufficient as a primary guarantor of security.

Consequently, small states rely heavily on external security partnerships, defence diplomacy and multilateral engagement as force multipliers. Bilateral agreements, joint exercises and professional military exchanges enhance interoperability and reinforce deterrence through cooperation rather than confrontation. In Brunei Darussalam's case, its calibrated defence posture, focused on stability and supported by external engagement, reflects a strategic approach that prioritises credibility without provocation, while leveraging partnerships to offset inherent constraints.

1.3.2 Economic Interdependencies

Small states are often highly integrated into global markets and dependent on a narrow range of economic sectors, making them particularly vulnerable to external shocks and coercion. In Brunei Darussalam's case, continued reliance on the oil and gas sector underpins economic stability, but also reinforces exposure to price volatility and global energy transitions. This vulnerability has been evident during periods of sharp oil price fluctuations, such as the 2020 price collapse and subsequent volatility linked to geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, which directly affected government revenues, fiscal space, and development spending. At the same time, the global shift toward decarbonisation and renewable energy has introduced longer-term structural risks, including potential declines in hydrocarbon demand and increasing pressure on export competitiveness. While downstream developments, such as the Hengyi Industries refinery and petrochemical complex, have contributed to diversifying export composition, they remain closely tied to the broader hydrocarbons value chain and thus do not fully insulate the economy from energy market dynamics.

Economic resilience is therefore inseparable from national security. Brunei Darussalam's diversification initiatives reflect a recognition that long-term security requires robust economic diplomacy, investment in emerging sectors and reduced dependence on a single strategic commodity.

1.3.3 Diplomatic Constraints

Small states face structural diplomatic constraints arising from limited overseas missions, finite diplomatic personnel and restricted policy bandwidth. This can constrain their ability to engage directly in global diplomacy across a wide geographic range or to participate robustly in multiple concurrent international initiatives. However, such constraints are not uniform across all small states. Some, such as Singapore, have developed extensive diplomatic networks and institutional capacities that allow for broader and more sustained global engagement, demonstrating that size alone does not determine diplomatic reach.

For small states such as Brunei Darussalam, diplomatic constraint is therefore not only a question of presence, but of prioritisation and opportunity cost. Engagement in one forum or issue area may necessarily come at the expense of attention elsewhere, limiting the ability to shape agendas proactively rather than respond reactively. In major international forums dominated by large powers, small-state positions may also struggle to gain traction unless amplified through collective or coalition-based mechanisms.

Brunei Darussalam's focused diplomatic network reflects deliberate strategic prioritisation of key regional and global centres, rather than disengagement. This approach, while efficient, reinforces reliance on multilateral platforms as primary avenues for influence. Through norms-based diplomacy, consensus-building and ASEAN-led mechanisms, Brunei Darussalam can offset asymmetries in power and visibility. However, this also means that the effectiveness of Brunei Darussalam's diplomacy is closely tied to the cohesion and credibility of the multilateral institutions it operates within, underscoring both the importance, and the vulnerability, of multilateralism for small states.

1.3.4 High Strategic Value

Despite inherent limitations, small states can possess disproportionate strategic significance, due to geography or valuable natural resources. Brunei Darussalam's proximity to the South China Sea places it at the intersection of major-power interests, elevating its strategic relevance. This positioning creates both opportunities and risks. While engagement with major powers can generate economic and diplomatic benefits, it also necessitates careful calibration to avoid entanglement and preserve autonomy.

1.4 Strategic Choices for Brunei

Brunei Darussalam's strategic choices in today's geopolitical landscape are shaped by internal capabilities, geographical location, economic structure and diplomatic traditions. Navigating today's complex environment requires a nuanced strategy approach that blends defence, with proactive diplomacy, economic foresight and resilience-building.

1.4.1 Deepening Defence Diplomacy and Security Partnerships

Defence diplomacy remains a central pillar of Brunei Darussalam's security posture, underpinning national defence objectives while contributing to regional stability. Through bilateral and multilateral engagements, Brunei Darussalam has cultivated strong defence ties with a number of regional and extra-regional partners. Within Southeast Asia's broader security landscape, long-standing frameworks such as the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), continue to provide an important backdrop for confidence-building and sustained defence engagement amongst participating states. Although Brunei Darussalam is not party to the FPDA, the arrangement contributes to a stable regional security environment within which Brunei conducts its defence diplomacy.

Brunei Darussalam's defence engagement is therefore advanced primarily through bilateral and minilateral partnerships, including cooperation with partners such as the US, China, Japan, and India. These relationships support capacity-building, professional military development and strategic diversification, while remaining consistent with Brunei Darussalam's preference for a pragmatic and non-aligned defence posture.

Through continued participation in joint exercises, training exchanges and defence dialogues with these partners, Brunei Darussalam enhances operational readiness and interoperability, while reinforcing its standing as a reliable, constructive and cooperative security partner in the regional defence ecosystem.

1.4.2 Leveraging Multilateralism and ASEAN Centrality

Brunei Darussalam has consistently championed ASEAN centrality as a cornerstone of its foreign and security policy. ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-

Plus (ADMM-Plus) enable Brunei Darussalam with platforms to engage with major powers on comparatively equal footing and to promote a rules-based regional order. Through ASEAN, Brunei Darussalam can amplify its voice in regional diplomacy, advocate for peaceful dispute resolution and reinforce principles such as the rule of law and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

In this context, Brunei Darussalam should continue to support consensus-building processes and remain vigilant against attempts to fragment ASEAN unity, whether through external pressure or competing minilateral arrangements. Preserving ASEAN unity and consensus is therefore not merely a diplomatic preference, but a strategic necessity for small states seeking to manage major-power competition. For Brunei Darussalam, a cohesive ASEAN enhances strategic space, reduces vulnerability to coercion and sustains an inclusive regional architecture that prioritises stability over rivalry.

1.4.3 Investing in NTS Resilience

In respect of NTS, the growing frequency of natural disasters and extreme weather events due to climate change poses significant risks to national infrastructure, food security, and public health. To address these issues, Brunei Darussalam should expand civil-military cooperation in disaster relief, enhance early warning systems, and invest in climate-resilient infrastructure. Moreover, improving cybersecurity capabilities and information resilience is crucial in safeguarding national security in the digital age. Inter-agency coordination and regional cooperation in intelligence sharing, maritime domain awareness, and public health preparedness are vital to build a holistic security posture.

1.4.4 Defence Modernisation and Human Capital Development

To sustain its long-term security and defence goals, it is prudent for Brunei Darussalam to invest in the modernisation of its defence forces in a manner that is financially sustainable and strategically selective. Priority areas include strengthening maritime surveillance, upgrading communications and intelligence systems and procuring capabilities tailored to the country's geographic and strategic context. For small states with finite resources, defence modernisation must therefore emphasise effectiveness, interoperability and adaptability rather than force expansion or power projection.

Alongside hardware improvements, there is a pressing need to develop human capital within the Ministry of Defence, including the Royal Brunei Armed Forces. This entails fostering leadership, encouraging academic and technical excellence and providing opportunities for officers to participate in regional and international military education and training programmes. Human development serves as a critical force multiplier, allowing Brunei Darussalam to maximise limited capabilities through professionalism, institutional learning and strategic literacy. A professional, future-oriented defence force will be instrumental in responding to emerging threats, supporting whole-of-government responses and ensuring national resilience.

1.5 Conclusion

As the geopolitical landscape continues to evolve amid multipolar competition, shifting alliances and the rise of NTS threats, Brunei Darussalam must embrace a strategy defined not by size, but by strategic clarity, adaptability and foresight. While small-state status presents inherent constraints, Brunei Darussalam's strategic location, diplomatic traditions, and economic standing equip it with meaningful tools to navigate geopolitical complexity.

Strengthening defence diplomacy, diversifying strategic partnerships and reinforcing its commitment to ASEAN-led multilateralism can enable Brunei Darussalam to safeguard its sovereignty while contributing to regional peace and stability. Investment in NTS resilience and human capital development is equally important to future-proof its national security strategy.

Ultimately, Brunei Darussalam's ability to remain secure and relevant will depend on its capacity to translate structural limitations into strategic discipline – leveraging partnerships, institutions and professionalism to offset material constraints. Looking ahead, proactive and principled engagement anchored in pragmatism, multilateral cooperation and calibrated defence planning will be essential in ensuring Brunei Darussalam's continued security, autonomy and relevance in an increasingly volatile international environment.

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2. The Strategic Role of ADMM in Addressing the Complex and Diverse Challenges Facing ASEAN Unity²

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2.1 Threats to ASEAN Unity

Southeast Asia is navigating through several significant geopolitical, security, defence, economic and social shifts. The COVID-19 health and supply crisis or pandemic has significantly impacted ASEAN unity in various ways. The crisis exposed both strengths and challenges within the region's collaborative efforts. Geopolitically, the region is caught between escalating U.S.-China tensions, with the different ASEAN member countries balancing relations between these superpowers. The intersection between security, economic and social shifts through the ongoing global trade war, particularly with the announcement of US tariff policy, has created both challenges and opportunities for Southeast Asia. While some countries benefit from shifting production and investment, the parts of the region face economic slowdowns, export dependency, and currency fluctuations. ASEAN continues to play a pivotal role in regional diplomacy, but unity is tested by issues such as the Myanmar crisis and the South China Sea dispute. Security-wise, there is increasing military modernisation and multiple minilateralism on the rise, in an attempt to address issues including territorial disputes. Defence cooperation among countries like the U.S., India, and Australia is strengthening both at the regional and minilateral scale.

The recent earthquake in Myanmar and Thailand, has had significant implications not only for the two countries but for the wider Southeast Asian region and ASEAN as a whole. This natural disaster, along with its subsequent humanitarian and geopolitical impacts, underscores the importance of ASEAN centrality in addressing such challenges.

Generally, Southeast Asia is balancing significant opportunities with internal and external challenges, positioning itself as a crucial region in global dynamics.

² This Commentary was presented on the 18th NADI Annual General Meeting held from 28 April 2025 to 01 May 2025, hosted by the Malaysia Institute of Defence and Security (MiDAS), Ministry of Defence, Malaysia.

Both traditional and non-traditional security threats, such as economic coercion, hybrid warfare, and climate-induced challenges, are prompting Southeast Asian countries to adapt and strengthen their resilience, both individually and through ASEAN unity.

2.2 The Strengths of the ADMM in Promoting ASEAN Unity

From the array of challenges that is affecting the ASEAN Unity mentioned earlier, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) remains highly relevant in addressing the complex and diverse challenges currently affecting ASEAN unity. The ADMM plays a pivotal role in fostering regional cooperation and maintaining stability:

- a) The health crisis in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic, on one hand, demonstrated ASEAN unity and solidarity by coordinating responses, sharing resources, and establishing mechanisms like the COVID-19 Response Fund and the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework. These efforts showcased the collective spirit of regional cooperation and mutual support. ADMM played a significant role during the crisis particularly in addressing health supply and services disparities as well as to minimise the spread of the disease within the region. The crisis underscored the need for ASEAN, including through ADMM, to strengthen its institutional frameworks and enhance cooperation in areas like public health, economic recovery, and digital transformation to better address future global challenges. The pandemic ultimately reinforced the importance of ASEAN unity in responding to transnational issues.
- b) Through its focus on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), ADMM facilitates the coordination of military and civilian resources during crises, ensuring rapid responses to disasters. The ADMM plays a significant role in regional security, including in responding to natural disasters and crises such as the recent earthquake that had affected Myanmar and Thailand. ADMM's involvement, especially in HADR efforts, is crucial in ensuring that ASEAN Member States (AMS) can collectively respond to these events in a coordinated and effective manner.
- c) ADMM also helps mitigate geopolitical tensions within ASEAN, particularly regarding issues like the South China Sea dispute, by providing a platform for dialogue and maintaining ASEAN's neutral diplomatic stance.

- d) The interoperability of ASEAN defence forces, promoted through joint exercises and cooperative frameworks like ADMM-Plus, enhances the region's collective defence capabilities and allows ASEAN to engage with external powers without compromising its strategic autonomy.
- e) Additionally, ADMM addresses the challenges posed by ASEAN's diverse political systems and sensitivities, including military regimes and democracies, by fostering continued engagement and cooperation, even in politically sensitive contexts. Through its emphasis on civil-military coordination, ADMM supports effective responses to both traditional and emerging security threats, such as climate change, hybrid warfare, and biosecurity risks.
- f) Finally, ADMM plays an important role in reinforcing ASEAN's global security influence, ensuring that the region's interests are represented in broader international discussions. By adapting to new challenges and maintaining its focus on collective security and regional resilience, ADMM is essential in upholding ASEAN unity and centrality in an increasingly multipolar and complex global security environment.
- g) Economically, Southeast Asia shows strong growth and unity despite challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, with nations focusing on regional integration through initiatives like Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), digital innovation, and sustainable recovery. Socially, the young, digitally engaged population is driving youth-led movements and addressing issues such as inequality and urbanisation, while countries face demographic challenges like aging populations.

2.3 ADMM: Achieving success through effective collaboration

2.3.1 Pragmatic and cautiously ambitious

Since its establishment, the ADMM has been recognised as a key security platform in the region, distinguished by its focus on confidence-building, capacity development, regular dialogue, and practical cooperation to foster trust among ASEAN members. Initially centered on addressing immediate concerns like the HADR, the ADMM has broadened its focus to encompass emerging threats such as maritime security, counter-terrorism, and cybersecurity. In essence, the ADMM has taken a pragmatic

approach to defence collaboration, primarily tackling non-traditional security challenges while demonstrating a measured ambition in its regional objectives.

2.3.2 Overcoming sensitivities and “consensus culture”

The ADMM's emphasis on practical cooperation is guided by the ASEAN approach of consensus-building, which considers the diverse interests and sensitivities of AMS. However, in light of the rapidly evolving global security landscape, the consensus culture, while offering certain advantages within the ADMM framework, may limit its effectiveness in addressing the dynamic and swiftly changing regional security challenges. Although the ADMM frequently issues joint declarations or statements, it often refrains from taking more assertive actions on certain traditional security issues, such as the South China Sea, due to the sensitivity of these issues for specific ASEAN Members, particularly in relation to the potential for confrontation with external powers due to the strategic and economic importance.

2.4 Reforms to sustaining and enhancing ADMM

The changing geopolitical landscape, in particular the intensification of U.S-China geostrategic competition, raises concerns about how long the ADMM and other ASEAN-led mechanisms can sustain their passive approach and steadfast commitment to consensus. There is a critical need for flexibility and the ability to adapt in response to the rapidly changing global challenges particularly emerging security threats.

The proliferation of minilateralism such as Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the U.S. (AUKUS) suggests that regional blocs have become less effective in addressing contemporary challenges. Some AMS are becoming less dependent on them, which raises concern on the waning of ASEAN unity and centrality. Because of this, it is crucial to critically assess how the ADMM can become more effective and proactive in addressing contentious and "hard" security issues.

Several potential key strategies to enhance its effectiveness in addressing global and regional security challenges include:

2.4.1 Supplemental arrangements

Reforms do not necessarily mean to replace, but rather supplement certain traditions when necessary. For example, using the minus-X or majority-vote arrangements to undertake faster, more decisive action, and flexible in decision-making rather than consensus-based approach for urgent and critical matters requiring prompt decision. However, if such arrangements are adopted, ASEAN must first: (a) issue identification and scope – consulting member states to identify critical and urgent issues, threats, disasters or crisis that warrant expedited decision-making processes, (b) ensure that these arrangements are inclusive, flexible and designed in manner acceptable to all members e.g. ensure all AMS have a voice in the matter and have flexible agreements where members can opt in or exclude themselves out of certain decisions, (c) having measures to address concerns of dissenting states e.g. the mechanism adopted by EU is the “opt out” provision where participating countries choose to not participate in specific policies or measures without affecting the overall progress of the regional bloc, and (d) the mechanisms in place should ensure transparency and accountability through regular updates on decisions and progress, as well as ongoing reviews, to facilitate timely adaptations or amendments, particularly in response to any unforeseen consequences.

2.4.2 Enhancing regional resilience

Enhancement of soft and hard defence and security infrastructure through continue and more multilateral cooperation whether through workshops, conferences, civilian and military training, financial aid during crisis and disasters as well as disaster and risk avoidance mechanisms or alerts e.g. collective role in enhancing tsunami and earthquake understanding through collaborative regional research funding and funding for defence and security such as the existing Republic of Korea (ROK) – ASEAN Research Funding.

2.4.3 Active Dialogue and Access to Regional and Global Security Networks

ASEAN must continue operating as a neutral platform and maintain active dialogue and consultation with all external partners through the ADMM, ADMM-Plus and other diplomatic mechanisms. This is to ensure strategic mutual trust and common understanding among all parties to mediate tensions and promote peaceful resolutions.

2.5 Conclusion: ADMM’s Bold Leap towards the Future

If the ADMM continues to function as a passive dialogue platform, it risks being overshadowed by other mechanisms, particularly in light of the resurgence of great power politics and the emergence of complex, non-traditional security threats. By redefining its role to become more responsive and proactive with faster decision-making, and building trust and confidence by addressing and adapting to new security threats, ADMM can help strengthen ASEAN unity in the face of future challenges. Regional cooperation such as the ADMM is especially crucial for smaller nations, as it enhances their defence initiatives and strengthens both national and regional stability. This is particularly relevant given the changing global landscape driven by superpowers, which includes the redefinition of borders and boundaries to access resources.

3. Unfinished Armour: Bridging Gaps in ASEAN Defence Industry Collaboration³

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3.1 Introduction: ASEAN Defence Industrial Collaboration

The defense industry within the ASEAN has undergone notable changes over the past twenty years due to geopolitical shifts, regional security issues, and technological progress. Since the ASEAN Defence Industry Collaboration (ADIC) framework was established in May 2011, there have been key advancements and cooperation in the ASEAN defense sector focused on preserving AMS sovereignty and interregional collaboration.

A trend within ASEAN is the effort to strengthen domestic defense industries (Bitzinger, 2016). Certain AMS have invested in developing indigenous capabilities to reduce reliance on foreign suppliers, enhance self-reliance and create economic opportunities by promoting local manufacturing and research and development (R&D). Technologies like unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), cybersecurity tools, and naval shipbuilding have become focal points.

AMS have also acknowledged the need for collaboration to address security challenges such as maritime piracy, terrorism, and territorial disputes (Shie, 2006). This has resulted in an increase in joint military exercises, coordinated disaster responses, and intelligence-sharing agreements.

A further emerging trend is the increasing involvement of private entities in ASEAN defense projects (Soraya et al., 2023). Governments are partnering with private companies to fund research, develop modern systems, and produce military hardware, leveraging their expertise and sharing the financial burden.

³ This Commentary was presented on the NADI Meeting held from 17 to 20 June 2025, hosted by National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP) & Armed Forces of the Philippines' Office for Strategic Studies and Strategy Management (AFP-OSSSM), the Philippines.

3.2 Collaboration Challenges within ASEAN

Although the formal establishment of the ADIC has created a foundation for improved regional defense cooperation, its complete potential remains unfulfilled due to various structural and strategic challenges (Soraya et al., 2023).

Firstly, the AMS have varying national security priorities and threat perceptions (Ariputro et al., 2024; Thea Diva et al., 2024), complicating their ability to align their defense industry objectives at the multilateral and collective level.

Secondly, there is disparity in respect of budget and technological capabilities among the AMS (Thea Diva et al., 2024). Some of the AMS have limited defence budgets, affecting their capacity or willingness to allocate funds for regional projects. Technological gaps on the other hand can cause structural, operational and strategic barriers to collaboration.

Thirdly, national procurement processes across ASEAN differ in standards, logistics, and supplier preferences, complicating interoperability and joint acquisition (Chang, 2021).

Fourthly, the effectiveness of the ADIC in promoting defence industry collaboration among the AMS is stunted by its non-binding nature, rendering it 'essentially a consultative entity, lacking enforcement powers, and currently not even funded by the ASEAN Secretariat' (Balakrishnan & Bitzinger, 2012).

3.3 Brunei Darussalam's Context and Constraints

The Ministry of Defence Brunei Darussalam's White Paper 2021 states: 'In future, Defence must ensure that appropriate resilience and self-reliance is incorporated within its sustainment approaches and plans. Efforts to explore the development of a domestic defence support industry will contribute to this' (Ministry of Defence of Brunei Darussalam, 2021).

While there is clear recognition of the importance of a domestic defence support industry, Brunei Darussalam still has a basic level of defence industry setup, with a dependence on imported technology. The defence industry is limited but growing at a slow pace. Brunei Darussalam also does not currently have formal defence industry policies.

In general, foreign defence companies are encouraged to offer innovative options for local industrial capability development in their tender proposals which will be evaluated by the Ministry of Defence and the Royal Brunei Armed Forces (RBAF) on a case-by-case basis.

In the medium to long term, the Ministry of Defence would require a moderate degree of self-reliance to enhance sovereign control over the operation of complex military equipment. This extends mainly to develop a local capacity to provision for, maintain, repair, adapt and sustain its capability assets, which implies developing local industry selectively focusing on maintenance and support.

In supporting the ADIC framework, the Ministry of Defence aspires to improve Brunei Darussalam's local innovation ecosystem between government, industry and academia through collaborative MOUs and initiatives with international and local stakeholders. To date, the Ministry of Defence's defence industry contributions include locally held defence exhibitions and conferences in line with the ADIC's objective of promoting defence industry networking and dialogue (Table 2).

Initiative	Details
Brunei Darussalam International Defence Exhibitions (BRIDEX)	BRIDEX 2007 (31 May to 2 June 2007) BRIDEX 2009 (12 to 15 August 2009) BRIDEX 2011 (6 to 9 July 2011) BRIDEX 2013 (3 to 7 December 2013)
Brunei Darussalam Conference on Defence Science and Technology (B-SCI)	Held on 27-28 June 2022 at the RBAF Defence Academy aimed to promote a community of professional network of researchers, scientists and engineers to fulfil the defence and security needs of Brunei Darussalam through the exchange of ideas, knowledge and current research.
Aerospace and Defence Equipment Exhibition	Held on 31 May 2023 on the occasion of the RBAF 62 nd Anniversary.
Defence Expo	Held on 31 May 2024 on the occasion of the RBAF 63 rd Anniversary.

Table 2: Defence Exhibitions and Conferences hosted by the Ministry of Defence and Royal Brunei Armed Forces (RBAF), Brunei Darussalam

3.4 Recommendations and Way Forward

3.4.1 ‘Low-hanging fruit’.

In the short term (1 to 3 years), AMS may focus on continuing collaboration in the defence industry by targeting easily achievable areas and strengthening existing initiatives. Continuing to share updated expert knowledge and best practices through conferences, workshops, and exhibitions via the existing ADIC platform will promote an ongoing common understanding of industry trends and challenges among AMS. The ADIC can also invite other nations and relevant entities, such as defence multinational companies, to participate. Furthermore, collaboration in the defence industry to manufacture dual-use defence equipment for less sensitive military operations, such as adaptation to, and mitigation of climate change, humanitarian and disaster relief, and peacekeeping operations, could be feasible and acceptable for all of the AMS. Efforts to strengthen intellectual property in the area of defence industry equipment may also contribute towards building trust and laying the framework for future ADIC initiatives.

3.4.2 ‘Go with the tide’.

In the medium-term (4 to 7 years), the AMS may choose to follow the prevailing trends by recognising and embracing diversity and disparity. There may be subsets of ASEAN countries at similar economic levels and with comparable technological readiness which can collaborate on mutually acceptable defence industry initiatives. The benefits from such collaboration – an ASEAN-based defence industry – can then lead to increased intra-regional self-reliance, greater strategic autonomy, technological advancements, and trickle-down economic gains within the AMS.

3.4.3 ‘All in’.

In the long-term (7 to 10 years), each AMS may opt to increase and/or harmonise defence spending on defence industry collaboration within ASEAN by committing a specified minimum percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for ASEAN-only defence expenditures to bolster the defence industry. Concurrently, each AMS may also aim to diversify their sources of arms imports to mitigate long-term dependency.

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4. Shared Future: Current Situation and Vision of China-ASEAN Defence Cooperation⁴

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4.1 Introduction

The evolution of ASEAN-China relations since the establishment of dialogue relations in 1991 has marked a significant transformation in regional security dynamics. With the formalisation of a strategic partnership in 2003, ASEAN and China have expanded their defence cooperation through a series of institutional mechanisms and policy frameworks. These include the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit and several joint exercises to deepen its defence ties. Collectively, these efforts have contributed to fostering mutual trust, enhancing regional capabilities, and strengthening interoperability.

During the commemoration of the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations in 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the vision of building five interconnected communities: peaceful, safe and secure, prosperous, beautiful, and amicable. This vision provides an inclusive and development-oriented framework for advancing ASEAN-China defence cooperation. It underscores the necessity of aligning defence partnerships with broader regional aspirations for peace, stability, and prosperity.

As ASEAN-China defence cooperation enters a new phase, it is characterised by greater depth, wider scope, and a stronger emphasis on innovation. Upholding multilateralism and reinforcing ASEAN centrality remain imperative in addressing both traditional and non-traditional threats, in ensuring that cooperation is shaped by regional priorities and inclusive mechanisms.

4.2 Practical Cooperation Amidst Contemporary Security Challenges

As we enter the second half of 2025, the region continues to grapple with a complex array of security threats. These include terrorism, maritime security tensions, climate

⁴ This Commentary was presented on the 3rd China-ASEAN Defence Think Tank Exchange (CADTE) from 18 to 21 June 2025, hosted by People's Liberation Army Academy of Military Sciences, China.

change, natural and man-made disasters, cyber vulnerabilities, and the strategic implications of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. Furthermore, these issues are compounded by intensifying geopolitical competition, which presents significant challenges to regional stability and collective security.

For Southeast Asia, mechanisms such as the ADMM-Plus have played a central role in institutionalising defence cooperation. Notable joint exercises under the ADMM-Plus platform—such as the ADMM-Plus EWG in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and Military Medicine Exercise in June 2013, and the ADMM-Plus EWG in Maritime Security and Counterterrorism Exercise in May 2016, both held in Brunei Darussalam—exemplify the PLA’s pivotal role in their success and reflect a shared commitment to practical and inclusive cooperation. These exercises serve not only as confidence-building measures but also as platforms for improving operational readiness and mutual understanding among participating states.

The deepening of multilateral cooperation is further reflected in the joint leadership of Brunei and China in co-chairing the ADMM-Plus Experts’ Working Group on Peacekeeping Operations (EWG-PKO) for the 2024–2027 cycle. The inaugural meeting, held in Bandar Seri Begawan in December 2024, identified several key priorities:

- Enhancing interoperability among ASEAN and Plus countries;
- Addressing evolving challenges in United Nations peacekeeping operations;
- Integrating the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda; and
- Advancing capacity-building and pre-deployment readiness.

These priorities reflect a forward-looking approach to collective peacekeeping efforts and reaffirm the shared commitment to enhancing ASEAN’s role in the regional security architecture.

Beyond institutional mechanisms and military exercises, people-to-people exchanges play a pivotal role in fostering strategic trust and long-term collaboration. The Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) of Brunei Darussalam and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of China have engaged in multiple areas of human resource development and professional engagement, as listed below:

4.2.1 Military Training and Education

Since 2016, personnel from MINDEF and the Royal Brunei Armed Forces (RBAF) have participated in various military courses and training programmes in China such as 2nd China-ASEAN Young and Middle-Aged Officers Exchange Activities in 2019 and 2023. Similarly, PLA officers have attended professional development courses in Brunei, including the Executive Development Programme (EDP), Command and Staff Course (CSC), and Intermediate Staff Course (ISC). These exchanges contribute to enhancing professional competencies and institutional resilience.

4.2.2 Professional and Cultural Visits

In 2023, Bruneian defence officials conducted a goodwill visit to China, aimed at strengthening military-to-military ties and promoting mutual cultural understanding through formal and informal engagements.

4.2.3 Track II Dialogues

Track II platforms such as the Beijing Xiangshan Forum, as well as China-ASEAN Defence Think Tank Exchange (CADTE) provide additional avenues for dialogue, knowledge exchange, and policy innovation. These platforms complement official mechanisms by fostering intellectual collaboration and collective policy formulation.

Together, these exchanges support regional stability through strategic trust-building and shared capacity enhancement.

4.3 Conclusion

ASEAN-China defence cooperation has matured into a multifaceted and strategically significant partnership. As both sides navigate an increasingly complex security environment, continued emphasis on multilateralism, practical cooperation, and people-centred engagement will be essential. Initiatives such as the Brunei-China co-chairmanship of the EWG-PKO and the expansion of military educational exchanges serve as exemplars of this evolving collaboration.

Ultimately, the decisions and partnerships forged today will have far-reaching implications for regional peace and stability. Strengthening mutual trust and

advancing inclusive security cooperation will remain critical to achieving a future grounded in stability, resilience, and mutual respect.

5. Strengthening AI Governance, Ethics, and Cooperation in the Defence Sector through ADMM⁵

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5.1 Introduction

The adoption of the Joint Statement on Cooperation in the Field of Artificial Intelligence in the Defence Sector by ASEAN during the 2025 ADMM's Retreat in Penang marks a significant advancement in regional governance of AI. This statement commits member states to implement transparent governance, ensure human-in-the-loop (HITL) oversight, comply with International Humanitarian Law (IHL), and foster cooperation through the sharing of best practices and technology transfer.

These developments emphasise the growing integration of AI within defence sectors and present ASEAN with critical opportunity to establish normative frameworks that promote the responsible deployment of military AI. This includes applications in HADR, maritime domain awareness (MDA), and cyber defence. However, significant gaps and challenges still remain. To address these issues, it is essential to promote multilateral initiatives aimed at enhancing capacity, strengthening interoperability, and prevent strategic fragmentation across the region.

This paper aims to explore the potential for defence collaboration among ASEAN AMS to enhance the development, deployment, and governance of AI technologies. It will address opportunities and challenges associated with the military adoption of these technologies within the region. The paper also advocates the establishment of an ASEAN Defence AI Code of Practice at a Multisectoral Level; and proposes the formation of a multilayered consortium to facilitate the pooling of expertise, sharing of resources, and ensuring interoperability among member states.

⁵ This Commentary was presented on the NADI Meeting from 26 to 29 August 2025, hosted by Strategic Studies Center (SSC), National Defence Studies Institute (NDSI), Thailand

5.2 Opportunities in Military AI Integration within ADMM

5.2.1 Cross-Domain Synergies for AI in Defence Collaboration

AI adoption within the ADMM framework can be most effective when tailored to the specific needs and priorities of its various Expert Working Groups (EWGs). For instance, the EWG on Cybersecurity can provide technical oversight, risk management frameworks, and guidance on secure AI deployment, while the EWG on Maritime Security could identify operational scenarios where AI-enabled surveillance or decision-support tools would enhance situational awareness. Similarly, EWGs focusing on HADR, counter- terrorism, or logistics could articulate requirements for AI applications in predictive analysis, resource allocation, and rapid response coordination. By coordinating requirements, testing prototypes jointly, and sharing lessons learned, ASEAN can create a mutually reinforcing ecosystem in which each EWG's expertise enhances the overall AI adoption strategy, promotes regional standardisation, and accelerates collective capability-building across member states.

5.2.3 Facilitating the Integration of AI through Cybersecurity Capabilities

The adoption of AI in the context of the ADMM presents significant potential. This is particularly true because the framework already includes the ADMM Experts' Working Group on Cybersecurity (EWG), which possesses established technical expertise, shared infrastructure, and collaborative mechanisms. By building on this foundation, AMS can enhance their existing cybersecurity capabilities to encompass AI research, development, and governance. This integration will help ensure that new AI-enabled defence technologies are implemented safely, securely, and in an interoperable manner across the region. By leveraging the ADMM's proven history of multinational coordination, standards-setting, and technical cooperation, the adoption of AI can advance while minimizing risks and fostering trust among member states.

5.3 Challenges to Military AI Adoption in the region

5.3.1 Governance and Ethical Gaps

While ASEAN released its Guide on AI Governance and Ethics in 2024, questions remain over how member states can collectively operationalise these principles in defence contexts. Effective AI governance in defence requires more than high-level guidance; it must encompass ethical principles and guidelines, regulatory frameworks and

compliance mechanisms, robust oversight and accountability structures, as well as safeguards against risks related to data integrity, system reliability, and algorithmic transparency. It also demands solutions to address broader challenges, such as arms race dynamics, the risk of miscalculation in autonomous weapon systems, data privacy concerns, and the recruitment and retention of specialised talent.

Currently, there is no binding global or regional framework for military AI. Within the ASEAN framework, there is no enforceable legal instrument to ensure accountability, transparency, or oversight in the use of AI-enabled military systems. Although the ADMM Joint Statement on AI in Defence marks progress by promoting responsible use, it remains non-binding. Consequently, important questions about accountability, enforceability, and legal recourse remain unresolved.

5.3.2 Uneven Adoption and Capacity Disparities

Technological and resource disparities between ASEAN states risk creating strategic imbalances. Advanced economies have invested in defence AI and established national strategies, whereas others face infrastructure gaps and a shortage of skilled personnel. Without harmonised standards and capacity-building, uneven adoption could deepen intra-ASEAN asymmetries and increase reliance on external powers.

5.4 Recommendations for ADMM

Globally, various initiatives illustrate possible pathways. Platforms such as United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research's (UNIDIR) Roundtable for AI, Security, and Ethics (RAISE) and the Global Partnership on AI (GPAI) foster multi-stakeholder collaboration across governments, industry, and civil society. At the national level, countries like Australia have developed layered governance models combining defence, parliamentary, and civilian oversight. Bilateral dialogues, such as the US-China discussions on AI risks, underline the importance of transparency and safety protocols, while regional frameworks, most notably in the European Union, demonstrate how coordinated funding, ethical standards, and interoperability measures can be advanced collectively. ASEAN can draw lessons from these experiences to develop its own coherent and regionally tailored approach to defence AI governance.

5.4.1 ASEAN Defence AI Code of Practice on a Multisectoral Level - Governance and Ethics

To strengthen responsible AI governance in the defence sector, ASEAN could consider establishing an ASEAN Defence AI Code of Practice under the ADMM Experts' Working Group on Cybersecurity (EWG). This Code would articulate shared principles, including HITL oversight, transparency, accountability, compliance with IHL, and robust cybersecurity standards for AI-enabled military systems. By providing a clearly defined, regionally endorsed framework, the Code would facilitate policy guidance, ensure legal compliance, and promote ethical oversight, and thereby enhancing interoperability and strategic trust among member states. Engaging multiple sectors or stakeholders, including defence, government regulators, academia, and industry will ensure that these governance standards are grounded in diverse expertise and can be effectively implemented across the region (technological ethical, legal, security, and societal perspectives). Moreover, drawing inspiration from global models or initiatives UNIDIR's RAISE platform, ASEAN can use multisectoral consultations, workshops, and joint scenario planning to align and harmonise ethical, legal, and technical standards while embedding them within the EWG's existing cybersecurity architecture.

5.4.2 Multilayered ASEAN AI Research and Development Consortium – Innovation and Implementation

Complementing the governance framework, ASEAN may establish a Defence AI Research and Development Consortium as a multi layered platform to drive collaborative innovation and shared technological advancement. This consortium would focus on practical R&D, testing, and operational deployment, structured around five layers:

- Strategic Layer -defining research priorities and governance principles;
- Coordination Layer-developing standards, guidelines, and frameworks to support projects;
- Technical Layer - pooling expertise, funding, and infrastructure for joint R&D initiatives;
- Operational Layer - piloting applications in areas such as maritime domain awareness, countering transnational crime, and disaster response; and
- Support Layer -strengthening skills, capacity-building, and outreach.

Global analogues, such as the European Defence Fund (EDF), demonstrate how multilayered consortia can combine multinational industry, academia, and government participation to co-develop interoperable AI systems, test prototypes, and share knowledge. ASEAN could adopt this model to accelerate collective innovation, leverage the region's diverse capabilities, and ensure practical deployment of AI while building long-term technical and operational capacity.

Nonetheless, while recognising the value of established global initiatives and best practices, it remains imperative that ASEAN adapts them in a manner consistent with its principles and values, while ensuring their applicability within the regional context.

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6. The Evolving Character of Warfare - Assessment of the Implications

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“The rapidly evolving global environment will continue to require effective and innovative responses to secure the future of ASEAN and its peoples.”

- *ASEAN Community Vision 2045: “Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN”*

6.1 Introduction

Warfare has long been associated with visible, physical confrontation, from the Napoleonic campaigns and the Crimean War in the 19th century to the World Wars and the Vietnam War. Even with advances such as radar, satellites, and precision-guided weapons, wars remained kinetic and visible, fought between states seeking dominance, territory, and influence.

Traditional warfare continues to shape global security, as seen in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war and other regional conflicts that reaffirm the enduring importance of military capability and deterrence. However, the character of warfare has evolved beyond the battlefield. The 21st century has seen the rise of non-kinetic and hybrid forms of competition, where power is exercised through economic, informational, and cognitive means. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how vulnerabilities extend beyond physical defence, while cyber operations, disinformation, and economic coercion increasingly blur the line between war and peace.

In the Asia-Pacific, this transformation is particularly evident. The region’s strategic environment is now shaped less by direct confrontation and more by the ability to influence outcomes through trade, connectivity, technology, and ideas. For ASEAN, this evolving landscape calls for strategic adaptation that balances attention between traditional and emerging threats. This paper examines economic warfare and soft power as key dimensions in the evolving character of warfare, assesses their implications for regional security, and explores how ASEAN can strengthen its readiness, resilience, and coherence in navigating an increasingly complex strategic environment.

⁶ This Commentary was presented in NADI Meeting on 10 to 13 November 2025, hosted by the Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Brunei Darussalam

6.2 Evolving Character of Warfare

Contemporary warfare now operates across economic, financial, and cognitive domains. Hybrid and grey-zone tactics blur the distinction between war and peace, with competition taking place through markets, technology, and public perception. Economic interdependence, once seen as a source of stability, has become a potential source of vulnerability. States now use access to markets, investments, or data as tools of leverage, achieving political or strategic objectives without open confrontation.

ASEAN's location and open economies make it uniquely exposed to these dynamics. As global trade routes, supply chains, and digital systems converge in Southeast Asia, the region's strategic and economic weight continues to grow. Today, ASEAN collectively stands as the world's fifth-largest economy⁷, underscoring both its importance and its deep interdependence with the global system. The challenge for ASEAN is to protect not only its borders but also its autonomy, unity, and credibility in a complex strategic environment.

6.3 Economic Warfare: Coercion through Connectivity

Economic warfare; broadly understood as the deliberate use of economic instruments such as sanctions, trade measures, loans, investment, and trade restrictions to influence or pressure other states. It represents the use of economic means to achieve strategic objectives, combining both inducement and coercion to shape the behaviour of others. As Baldwin (1985) explains, economic statecraft involves the use of economic resources as tools of power and influence in international relations. Similarly, Blackwill and Harris (2016) describe economic warfare as the "weaponization of interdependence," where states leverage financial systems, market access, or supply chains to impose costs or extract concessions.

In the region, major powers use economic initiatives as instruments of strategic competition. China's Belt and Road Initiative focuses on enhancing connectivity and infrastructure, providing growth opportunities but also creating potential dependencies through debt and long-term commitments. The United States' Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, meanwhile, promotes cooperation through supply chain resilience, digital standards, and clean energy initiatives, though often aligning it with

⁷ ASEAN Key Figures 2024

its own regulatory and strategic priorities. Both frameworks reflect broader efforts to shape the region's economic order and governance norms. Notably, the United States and China remain ASEAN's two largest sources of foreign direct investment (FDI)⁸, underscoring how deeply the region's economic growth and stability are intertwined with the strategic interests of these major powers.

For ASEAN, these developments bring both opportunity and risk. Economic engagement drives growth and integration, but excessive dependence on a single partner or market exposes vulnerabilities. The increasing use of trade restrictions, export controls, and investment conditionalities demonstrates how economic interdependence can be weaponised. Safeguarding economic sovereignty therefore requires ASEAN to strengthen regional supply chains, diversify partnerships, and improve transparency in external financing arrangements.

6.4 Soft Power as Strategic Influence

While economic warfare relies on material leverage and coercion to shape state behaviour, soft power functions through attraction and persuasion. Soft power seeks to shape preferences and legitimacy through shared values, cultural appeal, and credible narratives (Nye, 2004). As Nye (1990) first observed, soft power rests on the ability to make others want what you want, aligning interests voluntarily rather than through pressure or compulsion.

In the current global environment, soft power has evolved into a competitive strategic tool. States increasingly use cultural diplomacy, education, media influence, and technology partnerships to project their values and build trust. Competition for soft power has intensified, with nations seeking to restore credibility, strengthen cultural ties, and wield influence through non-coercive means (MacDonald & Murray, 2024). Competing regional narratives such as visions of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" or a "Community of Shared Future" illustrate how values and ideals shape strategic rivalry, with influence campaigns used to frame issues and sway public opinion.

For ASEAN, the challenge lies in maintaining narrative sovereignty, that is, the ability to author and preserve its own narrative in the regional and global discourse (Sinha, 2024). As major powers advance their own competing visions, ASEAN must ensure that its narrative of neutrality, inclusiveness and centrality remains credible and influential.

⁸ ASEAN Investment Report 2024

Building confidence and communicating ASEAN's relevance are essential to preserving unity amid competing sources of persuasion.

6.5 Implications for Regional Security Architecture

Economic warfare and the use of soft power is transforming the foundations of regional security. Traditional defence frameworks, designed for physical threats, must now adapt to address multidimensional challenges. These new forms of contestation are less visible but equally consequential, eroding trust, shaping perceptions, and influencing strategic decisions without the use of force.

ASEAN's consensus-based approach remains an important strength for maintaining neutrality and preventing escalation. However, it can also slow collective responses to fast-evolving security environment. These vulnerabilities risk fragmenting regional unity, deepening strategic dependency, and polarising national interests.

The challenge, therefore, is to broaden understanding of what constitutes security and to coordinate more effectively across different sectors and communities. By building a more comprehensive and interconnected approach, ASEAN can transition from a posture of crisis management to one of anticipatory governance, capable of addressing these evolving warfare before they manifest into instability.

6.6 ASEAN Readiness and Adaptation

ASEAN's adaptive capacity lies in its long-standing ability to cooperate pragmatically despite political and developmental differences. However, preparing for the evolving character of warfare requires the region to adopt a more integrated and forward-looking vision of security.

In recent years, ASEAN through the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus mechanisms has made tangible progress in strengthening defence cooperation in non-traditional security threats such as cybersecurity, maritime security, and counter-terrorism. These platforms have advanced confidence-building measures, promoted interoperability, and facilitated practical cooperation. Yet, while these initiatives reflect ASEAN's growing commitment to regional security, it often function independently, without sufficient continuity or integration across sectors. This compartmentalisation limits ASEAN's ability to develop a comprehensive and

sustained response to hybrid and non-kinetic threats that cut across political, economic, and social dimensions.

To strengthen readiness, ASEAN must cultivate a more cohesive security ecosystem that links its three community pillars; political-security, economic, and socio-cultural into a unified framework for resilience. A more proactive early-warning and foresight capacity is essential for identifying emerging vulnerabilities. By integrating data analysis, policy coordination, and scenario-based planning, ASEAN can shift from a reactive posture to one that is anticipatory and adaptive. From this, ASEAN can build a foundation of resilience that extends beyond its defence institutions. This whole-of-nation approach will be key to ensuring that ASEAN remains prepared, cohesive, and credible amid the complexities of modern conflict.

6.7 Recommendations

The growing influence of economic warfare and soft power competition requires ASEAN to broaden its understanding of security beyond conventional defence. Recognising these domains as part of the region's strategic environment is the first step in ensuring collective preparedness and resilience.

To respond effectively, ASEAN should strengthen joint research and strategic foresight. Regional institutions such as NADI and national defence think tanks can collaborate on studies examining how economic and informational tools are used to shape strategic outcomes. A dedicated fund and steering group could coordinate priorities and resources, while a regular ASEAN Strategic Futures Report (prepared by NADI in consultation with the ADMM) would provide policymakers with an evidence-based foundation to anticipate and counter coercive economic or narrative tactics.

ASEAN's response must also be holistic and interconnected. Addressing economic coercion and soft power influence requires not only military readiness but also economic stability, digital resilience, and public confidence. A whole-of-community approach linking defence establishments, government agencies, the private sector, and civil society would help build comprehensive resilience and maintain ASEAN's cohesion amid external pressures.

Adaptation does not require the creation of new bureaucratic structures. ASEAN already possesses an extensive network of mechanisms under the ADMM and ADMM-Plus frameworks, which can be leveraged to integrate discussions on economic and

cognitive warfare. This approach promotes continuity, avoids duplication, and strengthens ASEAN's credibility as a responsive and forward-looking regional actor.

Finally, ASEAN's long-term resilience depends on building adaptive capacity through education and communication. Defence and policy institutions should incorporate emerging non-kinetic threats including economic coercion and information influence into professional education, training, and leadership programmes. Building awareness and capability in these areas will enable ASEAN to anticipate, counter, and adapt to evolving character of warfare.

6.8 Conclusion

The evolving character of warfare highlights that future conflicts will not only be fought with weapons but also with influence, information, and economics. The line between peace and conflict is increasingly blurred, demanding greater adaptability and foresight.

For ASEAN, maintaining unity and autonomy amid external competition requires recognising the strategic nature of these non-kinetic threats. The task is not to militarise economic or cognitive domains, but to understand and manage them through cooperation, resilience, and informed policy. In doing so, the region will remain true to the spirit of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045; a resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centred community capable of navigating an increasingly complex global environment.

7. *Maqasid Shariah* and its Strategic Relevance to Defence Architecture

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7.1 Introduction

In the modern security environment, nations face a wide variety of threats such as armed conflict, cyber-attacks, extremist ideologies, public health crises and ecological disasters. As these threats continue to evolve, it becomes essential to revisit the ethical and philosophical foundations underpinning national defence. Within Islamic thought, *Maqasid Shariah*, as articulated by classical scholars such as Imam al-Ghazali,

⁹ Nur Balqis Hamizah binti Amzari was an intern from UNISSA (12 May to 21 July 2025)

further systematised by Imam al-Shatibi, and later expanded by Ibn ‘Ashur, represents the overarching objectives of Islamic law that provides a holistic moral and strategic guide for shaping defence policies and military practices.

In this context, ethics are not peripheral to security, but integral to how defence power is exercised, legitimised and sustained. This paper therefore examines how the five fundamental principles of *Maqasid Shariah* can be reflected into Brunei’s defence architecture, understood here as the integrated system of defence policies, institutional structures, governance mechanisms, operational practices, and human development within the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) and the Royal Brunei Armed Forces (RBAF). The paper explores how *Maqasid Shariah* shapes not only strategic intent, but also the organisational roles, military conduct, and professional values that underpin the country’s defence establishment, ensuring that security efforts remain operationally effective and ethically grounded in the welfare of Islamic society.

7.2 The Ethical Foundation of *Shariah* in Defence

7.2.1 *Shariah* and Strategic Governance

Shariah is more than a religious code, it is a holistic system that governs human behavior, societal organisation, and justice. Derived from the Qur’an, Sunnah, consensus (*ijma*), and analogical reasoning (*qiyas*)¹⁰, *Shariah* addresses not only spiritual matters but also political, economic, and military responsibilities.

In the context of defence, *Shariah* establishes a distinctive framework that balances authority with accountability, highlighting moral restraint, proportionality, and respect for the sanctity of life. From a defence governance standpoint, this framework delineates clear ethical parameters regarding the use of force, reinforces command responsibility, and enhances public confidence in security institutions.

7.2.2 What is *Maqasid Shariah*?

Maqasid Shariah refers to the objectives of Islamic law designed to ensure public welfare (*maslahah*) and prevent harm (*mafsadah*). Classical scholars identified five primary aims: Protection of Religion (*Hifz ad-Din*), Protection of Life (*Hifz al-Nafs*),

¹⁰ Following the foundational principle in Sunni Islamic jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*); this four-source framework was classically systematised by Imam al-Shafi’i in his seminal work, the *Risala*.

Protection of Intellect (*Hifz al-'Aql*), Protection of Lineage (*Hifz al-Nasl*), and Protection of Wealth (*Hifz al-Mal*)¹¹.

In the context of MINDEF and RBAF, these principles offer a coherent ethical framework for defence policy, force development and military conduct. The core functions of national defence: protecting lives, maintaining peace and stability, and safeguarding sovereignty, closely correspond with the fundamental aims of *Maqasid Shariah*.

At the same time, the emphasis on ethical conduct, responsibility and the prevention of harm reinforces the role of the armed forces as not only a security institution but also as a guardian of public welfare and social order. Grounding defence architecture, particularly strategies and military activities, in the objectives of *Maqasid Shariah*, shall align operational effectiveness with moral legitimacy and long-term societal stability. The Defence White Paper 2021 (DWP 2021) affirms that MINDEF and the RBAF remain committed in upholding and preserving the framework of *Maqasid Shariah* within the organisation.¹²

7.2.2.1 The Three Classifications of *Maqasid Shariah*

Maqasid Shariah, is categorised into three tiers based on their significance to human well-being and societal order¹³. The first, *Al-Daruriyyah* (essentials), encompasses fundamental necessities critical for survival. In the defence context, this includes safeguarding sovereignty, territorial integrity, public security, and social stability. The role of the RBAF in ensuring peace, upholding justice, and supporting the protection of Islamic values and national institutions reflects the fulfilment of these essential objectives. Without credible defence and security structures, societal order and national cohesion would be fundamentally undermined.

The second tier, *Al-Hajiyyah* (needs), addresses aspects that ease hardship and enhance quality of life, even though their absence may not lead to immediate societal collapse. Within the defence and security domain, this includes military readiness, capability development, defence diplomacy, strategic partnerships and

¹¹ Classical scholars, most notably Imam al-Ghazali and Imam al-Shatibi, argued that every law in Islam is ultimately designed to protect one or more of these five interests.

¹² Ministry of Defence of Brunei Darussalam, Defence White Paper 2021: Defending the Nation's Sovereignty – A Secure and Resilient Future (Bandar Seri Begawan: Ministry of Defence, 2021), 48.

¹³ Al-Shatibi, I. I. M. (2012). The reconciliation of the fundamentals of Islamic law: *Al-Muwafaqat fi Usul al-Shari'a* (I. A. K. Nyazee, Trans.; Vol. 1). Garnet Publishing. (Original work published c. 1388).

comprehensive contingency planning. These elements strengthen national preparedness and reduce systemic vulnerabilities without imposing undue strain on the state or society.

The third, *Al-Tahsiniyyah* (complementaries), focuses on ethical refinement, moral conduct, and the pursuit of excellence. In the armed forces, this is reflected in military professionalism, discipline, leadership integrity, adherence to ethical standards in operations and respect for humanitarian principles. Embedding Islamic ethics within military culture strengthens public trust in the security forces and reinforces institutional credibility and public confidence in defence establishments.

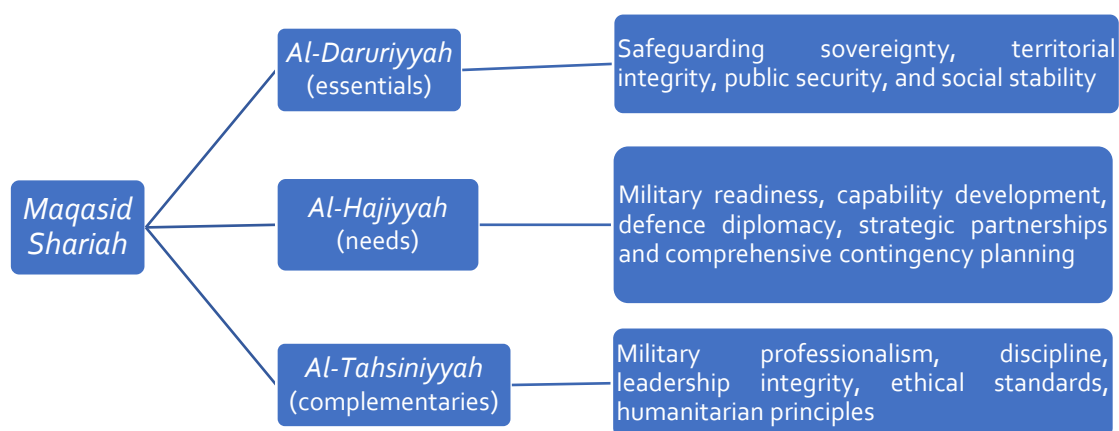


Figure 1: The Three Classifications / Tiers of Maqasid Shariah in the context of defence

Collectively, these three tiers of *Maqasid Shariah* offer a comprehensive framework for shaping a defence posture that is not only operationally effective, but also morally grounded, humane, and aligned with Islamic values and philosophy.

7.2.3 Applying *Maqasid Shariah* to Defence Strategy

MINDEF continues to integrate the five essential principles of *Maqasid Shariah* to guide defence strategy and principles with the organisation. Within this framework, *Maqasid Shariah* functions as a strategic compass - shaping defence to be more flexible and responsive, secure, disciplined, supportive and stabilising, and trusted, as highlighted in the DWP 2021.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ministry of Defence of Brunei Darussalam, Defence White Paper 2021, 51-52.

7.2.3.1 Protection of Religion (*Hifz ad-Din*)

The protection of religion is a central objective in Islamic jurisprudence and plays a vital role in maintaining a peaceful and harmonious society. A stable nation is one in which freedom of belief is respected, spiritual values are preserved, and diverse communities can coexist without fear of discrimination or persecution. In Brunei, the defence establishment supports this objective by fostering an environment in which religious practice is respected, moral values are upheld, and personnel of different faiths are able to serve with dignity and mutual respect within the armed forces, as reflected in the provision of prayer facilities and incorporation of religious practices during their duties. Such an approach strengthens cohesion, discipline and institutional unity while remaining consistent with Islamic principles and the country's national philosophy.

7.2.3.2 Protection of Life (*Hifz al-Nafs*)

The preservation of human life is one of the highest objectives in Islamic legal and ethical thought, making it a foundational element of any defence strategy guided by *Maqasid Shariah*. This principle mandates that the sanctity of life must be at the forefront of all military planning and operations. Defence policies must be carefully crafted to ensure that the use of force is always governed by the principles of proportionality, necessity, and discrimination between combatants and non-combatants. The deliberate minimisation of civilian casualties and collateral damage is not merely a tactical concern, but a binding moral and strategic obligation rooted in this principle.

Beyond the battlefield, the protection of life also requires defence institutions to address non-traditional threats such as pandemics, natural disasters, and food or water insecurity. A comprehensive national security approach includes disaster preparedness, emergency response, and humanitarian assistance. This is reflected in the RBAF's involvement in disaster relief operations, search and rescue missions, medical evacuations, and support to civil authorities during emergencies such as floods, fires, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, by investing in peacebuilding initiatives, mediation efforts and regional stability programs, defence institutions can prevent the outbreak of violence and reduce occurrence of armed conflict. From a *Maqasid* perspective, prevention is itself a form of protection, reinforcing the principle that safeguarding life is not confined to

crisis response, but encompasses proactive efforts to avert harm. In this way, the protection of life functions simultaneously as a strategic goal and a moral commitment to preserving human dignity under all circumstances.

7.2.3.3 Protection of Intellect (*Hifz al-'Aql*)

The protection of intellect emphasises sound judgement, knowledge-based decision-making and ethical reasoning in matters of governance and security, including defence affairs. Within the RBAF, this principle underscores the importance of intellectual integrity in strategic assessment, intelligence analysis and command decision-making. Safeguarding intellect is therefore fundamental to preventing miscalculation, escalation, and policy errors that may arise from cognitive bias.

At the institutional level, MINDEF translates this principle into practice through sustained investment in defence education and professional development. The establishment of institutions such as the RBAF Defence Academy, the RBAF Training Institute, Centre of Science and Technology Research and Development (CSTRAD) and the Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (SHHBIDSS) reflects a deliberate effort to strengthen critical thinking, strategic assessment, and informed leadership within the defence establishment. Through professional military education, strategic research, and continuous training, these institutions ensure that decision-making within the RBAF is guided by knowledge, sound judgement, and intellectual discipline. In doing so, the protection of intellect shall become embedded within Brunei's defence architecture.

7.2.3.4 Protection of Lineage (*Hifz al-Nasl*)

The protection of lineage focuses on preserving family integrity, human dignity and social stability. In the defence sector, this principle is upheld through discipline, personnel management and welfare systems that prevent misconduct and protect both military personnel and civilians. Such measures ensure that defence institutions do not undermine the social fabric they are mandated to defend.

Support for service members and their families, combined with security efforts to protect vulnerable communities during crises, contributes to long-term social cohesion. From a defence perspective, morale, discipline and family stability are directly linked to institutional resilience and operational effectiveness. Through these integrated efforts, MINDEF not only ensures immediate security but also preserves the

moral fabric, dignity of families and long-term social stability of the nation, thereby safeguarding future generations in accordance with the *Maqasid Shariah* principle of safeguarding lineage and future generations.

7.2.3.5 Protection of Wealth (*Hifz al-Mal*)

In the framework of *Maqasid Shariah*, the protection of wealth is a vital objective that extends to securing a nation’s foundations and financial well-being. In today’s interconnected world, economic stability is inseparable from national defence. A comprehensive defence strategy must therefore include robust mechanisms to protect natural resources, critical infrastructure and economic assets from both internal and external threats.

These threats may include economic espionage, strategic sanctions, illicit trade, corruption, and cyberattacks targeting financial institutions or state-owned industries. Failure to protect such assets can directly weaken national resilience and constrain defence readiness. In Brunei context, this is reflected in the RBAF’s role in safeguarding maritime zones and offshore oil and gas installations, protecting sea lines of communication, supporting maritime security operations against illegal activities, and strengthening cyber and information security measures within defence networks. Such roles contribute directly to the protection of national economic lifelines.

By safeguarding public resources and promoting accountability, defence expenditure also supports operational readiness while remaining consistent with the ethical objectives of *Maqasid Shariah*. This ensures that defence capability development contributes to security, sustainability and public trust.

<i>Maqasid Shariah</i>	Protection of Religion (<i>Hifz ad-Din</i>)	Establishment of JAMAAT, provision of prayer facilities, religious training and incorporation of religious practices during duties, including upholding MIB and RBAF’s <i>nilai-nilai teras</i> .
	Protection of Life (<i>Hifz al-Nafs</i>)	Holistic Defence (as one of MINDEF’s Defence Pillars), HADR missions, peace-building / peacekeeping operations and adherence to

		International Humanitarian Law (IHL).
	Protection of Intellect (<i>Hifz al-'Aql</i>)	Effective intelligence, countering misinformation and disinformation, cyber security and establishment of RBAF DA, RBAF TI, CSTRAD and SHHBIDSS.
	Protection of Lineage (<i>Hifz al-Nasl</i>)	Personnel welfare management including their families, offering health provision, as well as protection of vulnerable communities (crisis prevention etc.).
	Protection of Wealth (<i>Hifz al-Mal</i>)	RBAF duties and operations in protection of natural resources, critical infrastructure and economic assets. Prudent defence spending.

Figure 2: Examples for application of *Maqasid Shariah* in MINDEF and RBAF

7.3 Conclusion

Maqasid Shariah offers a powerful, values-based framework for defence strategy in the modern security environment. Its five core objectives align closely with the fundamental responsibilities of defence establishments, including the protection of life, preservation of social order, safeguarding of national resources and maintenance of ethical conduct in the use of force. As demonstrated throughout this paper, MINDEF and the RBAF incorporate these principles within their defence architecture through policies, institutional structures, professional education, operational conduct, and governance practices. In doing so, *Maqasid Shariah* functions not merely as a moral reference, but as a guiding framework that informs how defence power is organised, exercised, and sustained.

Maqasid Shariah encourages a holistic understanding of security that extends beyond military capability alone. By recognising the importance of intellectual integrity, social cohesion, economic stability, and moral governance, MINDEF and the RBAF are better positioned to address the complex and multi-dimensional threats of the modern era. In this regard, continued integration of *Maqasid Shariah* into Brunei's defence architecture strengthens not only operational effectiveness, but also the ethical foundations and long-term resilience of national defence.



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ISBN 978-99917-36-83-9



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