



## Diplomatic Gastronomy as a Strategy to Strengthen Bilateral Relations in Southeast Asia

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### ABSTRACT

Culinary diplomacy has emerged as a vital component in strengthening bilateral relations amid the dynamic geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia. This article examines Indonesia's use of culinary diplomacy as a strategic tool in foreign policy, highlighting how the nation's rich culinary heritage plays a significant role in fostering cross-border ties. By analyzing case studies and regional geopolitical contexts, the article reveals both the successes and challenges Indonesia faces in implementing this soft power strategy. The findings suggest that, despite certain obstacles, culinary diplomacy has made a meaningful contribution to enhancing interstate relationships and positioning Indonesia more prominently within the global geopolitical arena.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Amid increasingly complex global geopolitical changes, diplomacy is no longer limited to formal relations between countries, but has developed into more subtle and cultural forms. One form of soft power diplomacy that is currently attracting attention is gastronomic diplomacy, an approach that utilizes food and culinary riches as a medium to build national identity, strengthen bilateral relations, and influence public perception in the international arena. In the context of globalization that emphasizes the importance of cultural resonance in international relations, gastronomic diplomacy is present as a strategic means to strengthen cooperation between countries through more humanistic and highly culturally attractive channels (Untari et al., 2022).

The Southeast Asian region, known for its cultural diversity and ever-evolving geopolitical dynamics, is a very potential region for the implementation of gastronomic diplomacy. Indonesia, as a country with a very diverse culinary wealth and strategic geographical position, provides an interesting example of the use of culinary diplomacy as part of a foreign policy strategy. Although the discourse on public diplomacy and soft power is growing, in-depth studies on the role of food as an instrument of state diplomacy, especially in the context of Southeast Asia, are still relatively limited. Therefore, this article is here to enrich the scientific treasury by examining how Indonesia actualizes gastronomic diplomacy to strengthen bilateral relations in the Southeast Asian region (Pujayanti, 2017; Baskoro, 2022).

The uniqueness of gastronomic diplomacy lies in its ability to reach all levels of society directly, creating a cultural experience that is not rigid and easily accepted, even by the public who do not yet have close ties with the country of origin of the food. In this case, culinary not only functions as a cultural symbol, but also as a medium of communication that conveys national narratives, social values, and diversity. Interaction through food can create a sense of emotional closeness between nations, which indirectly supports the formation of a positive image of the country in the eyes of the world. This type of diplomacy is becoming increasingly relevant as countries seek alternative approaches to building strategic partnerships outside formal state channels (Simatupang et al., 2025).

In the context of Indonesia, gastronomic diplomacy has begun to be mainstreamed in various international agendas such as cultural exhibitions, culinary festivals, and diplomatic forums involving Southeast Asian countries. This effort is part of a grand strategy to position Indonesia as the center of Asian culinary, while strengthening regional relations based on shared history, culture, and Asian values. However, despite its great potential, Indonesian culinary diplomacy still faces challenges such as lack of policy consistency, minimal support for cultural infrastructure, and the need for integration between culinary actors and diplomatic institutions. Therefore, it is important to understand in depth how gastronomic diplomacy is practiced, and how its effectiveness can be increased in strengthening Indonesia's position in the geopolitical dynamics of Southeast Asia. This study aims to examine how Indonesian gastronomic diplomacy is implemented in strengthening bilateral relations amidst the geopolitical dynamics of the region, while identifying strategies, challenges, and contributions to Indonesia's position in international diplomacy (Ramadhan, 2023; Mayana & Santika, 2024).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Soft Power Theory*

Soft power is a concept introduced by Joseph Nye, which explains the ability of a country to influence other countries without using military force, but through cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policy (Nye, 2004). In the context of culinary diplomacy, food is an effective medium of soft power because it can shape the international public's perception of a country positively and touch the emotional and cultural aspects of foreign communities. Culinary diplomacy as a form of soft power can also strengthen a country's image and expand its influence in bilateral and multilateral relations (Kumar & Sharma, 2020).

H1: Indonesia's culinary diplomacy contributes significantly to strengthening bilateral relations in Southeast Asia through soft power mechanisms.

### *Public Diplomacy Theory*

Public diplomacy is a strategic communication process carried out by a country to reach foreign communities directly in order to build understanding, trust, and mutually beneficial relationships (Melissen, 2005). Culinary diplomacy falls into this category because it involves activities that reach foreign communities, such as food festivals, chef training, diaspora stalls, and digital culinary campaigns. Indonesia, through initiatives such as "Indonesian Culinary Diplomacy" and "Wonderful Indonesia", has used a public diplomacy approach in promoting its cuisine as part of its foreign relations strategy (Janes & Sadek, 2021).

H2: Indonesian culinary diplomacy functions as an effective form of public diplomacy in building a positive perception of Indonesia among the international community.

### *Conceptualization of Research Context (Contextual Framework)*

This research is qualitative with a case study approach, analyzing how Indonesia's culinary diplomacy strategy plays a role in strengthening bilateral relations, especially amidst the geopolitical dynamics of Southeast Asia. The research utilizes a conceptual framework that integrates soft power and public diplomacy theories to examine the effectiveness, challenges, and opportunities of implementing Indonesia's culinary diplomacy strategy.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework**

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method. The purpose of this approach is to explore in depth the practice of Indonesian culinary diplomacy as a foreign diplomacy strategy in strengthening bilateral relations in the Southeast Asia region. Case studies are chosen to provide an analytical focus on the dynamics that occur in the implementation of culinary diplomacy strategies, with relevant real examples, such as the Indonesia-Malaysia relationship.

The population in this study includes all Indonesian culinary diplomacy practices and policies that have been carried out by government and non-government institutions. The research sample is focused on culinary diplomacy activities carried out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, and cross-sector cooperation with Indonesian culinary actors abroad. Sample selection was carried out purposively based on the relevance and relevance to the context of bilateral relations in Southeast Asia.

Data collection was conducted through a literature study involving official government documents, diplomatic reports, scientific journal articles, and media publications related to culinary diplomacy. In addition, documentation techniques were used for culinary promotion activities carried out by Indonesia at the international level. Data were analyzed using a content analysis approach, which aims to identify patterns of strategy, impacts, and challenges that arise from the practice of culinary diplomacy. The results of the analysis were then linked to the geopolitical dynamics of the region to understand the contribution of culinary diplomacy to Indonesia's foreign policy as a whole.

## **RESEARCH RESULT**

This research was conducted through a qualitative approach with literature study methods and case study analysis. The initial step in this research is to explore the concept of culinary diplomacy as a form of cultural diplomacy that aims to strengthen bilateral relations between countries. To that end, the author analyzes relevant literature on culinary diplomacy, and examines how countries such as Indonesia utilize national culinary wealth as an instrument of foreign diplomacy. After the basic concept is built, the research continues by analyzing the geopolitical context of Southeast Asia, including the competition of major powers in the region such as China and the United States, as well as Indonesia's strategic position as the largest country in the region. The next step is to explore the concrete strategies of culinary diplomacy that have been implemented by Indonesia, ranging from international culinary festivals, chef exchange programs, promoting local food through Indonesian stalls abroad, to integrating culinary into foreign policy strategies. The case study of the relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia is an important focus for understanding the practical dynamics of culinary diplomacy, including the opportunities and challenges that arise in the field.

The results of the study show that Indonesian culinary diplomacy plays a significant role in strengthening bilateral relations with countries in Southeast Asia. One of the main findings is that culinary promotion through food festivals, such as the Wonderful Indonesia Culinary Festival, has proven effective in improving the image of Indonesian culture. Food becomes a medium of cultural communication that can be widely accepted by the foreign public, creating a positive impression, and triggering interest in Indonesian culture as a whole. Culinary diplomacy is also an important part

of foreign economic strategy, as it facilitates the export of food products, supports local small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and opens up opportunities for trade cooperation with partner countries. In this context, culinary diplomacy not only functions as a tool for cultural promotion, but also as a lever for the local economy.

In addition, the research results show that Indonesia has integrated culinary diplomacy strategies into its foreign policy comprehensively. The Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Trade are involved in designing and implementing various culinary programs abroad. This cross-sectoral approach strengthens the effectiveness of culinary diplomacy as part of nation branding. Through a network of Indonesian embassies and cultural centers abroad, the government has facilitated the opening of Indonesian stalls serving traditional foods such as rendang, satay, and fried rice to the global public. This activity also serves as a cultural window that introduces Indonesia's national identity to the outside world.

In the case study of Indonesia-Malaysia bilateral relations, it was found that culinary diplomacy plays a complex but important role. On the one hand, the similarities in culinary culture between the two countries serve as a foundation for strengthening cultural cooperation, through holding joint culinary festivals, chef exchanges, and cross-country promotion of culinary products. On the other hand, challenges also arise in the form of cultural identity rivalries over similar traditional foods, such as disputes over rendang and nasi lemak. This shows that culinary diplomacy does not always run smoothly and must be managed carefully, especially in the context of bilateral relations that have a long history and high national sensitivity.

Furthermore, the research results show that Indonesia's culinary diplomacy strategy has contributed to strengthening Indonesia's position in the geopolitical dynamics of the Southeast Asian region. Amid increasing political tensions and competition between major powers such as the United States and China, the soft diplomacy approach through food is a more flexible, non-confrontational alternative that can reach the wider community. This strategy enables Indonesia to build good relations with various countries without having to get caught up in harsh geopolitical tensions.

In addition to success, the study also noted several major challenges in implementing Indonesian culinary diplomacy. First is the need to adjust culinary promotion to changes in global consumption patterns, such as the increasing trend of healthy, vegan, and plant-based foods. Second, the challenge of maintaining domestic food security and ensuring the sustainability of the local food supply chain so that culinary promotion does not conflict with domestic needs. Third, the limited human resources trained in international culinary and suboptimal digital promotion are obstacles to reaching a wider global market.

However, the analysis also shows that there are great opportunities that can be utilized. The increasing global interest in Southeast Asian culture opens the way for Indonesia to further highlight its culinary heritage. In addition, the use of digital technology and social media provides new space for Indonesian culinary diplomacy to reach global audiences more effectively and cheaply. Strategies such as collaboration with international culinary influencers, interactive promotions through short video platforms, and digitalization of culinary festivals can be forms of innovation that expand the reach of promotions.

Overall, this study concludes that Indonesia's culinary diplomacy has proven to be a powerful soft power instrument in improving its national image, strengthening bilateral relations, and strengthening Indonesia's position amidst the geopolitical dynamics of Southeast Asia. The success of this strategy is highly dependent on cross-sector coordination, continuous innovation, and adaptive responses to changing global trends. By optimizing culinary diplomacy as an integral part of its foreign policy, Indonesia has the potential to strengthen its regional influence in a peaceful, cultural, and sustainable manner.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study show that culinary diplomacy has transformed into a strategic instrument in Indonesia's international relations, especially in the geopolitically dynamic Southeast Asia region. Through culinary promotion, Indonesia is able to build a positive and inclusive cultural narrative, which reaches foreign audiences directly without going through formal diplomatic channels. This is in line with the concept of soft power which emphasizes the appeal of culture as a tool of influence. In this context, food is not just a commodity for consumption, but becomes a representation of national identity that can create emotional bonds, strengthen closeness, and smooth structural diplomatic tensions.

Furthermore, culinary diplomacy has proven to strengthen Indonesia's bilateral cooperation with neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Activities such as culinary festivals, chef exchanges, and the opening of Indonesian food stalls abroad not only introduce the diversity of Indonesian flavors, but also become a space for intercultural encounters. However, culinary diplomacy is not without challenges. Claims over certain culinary delights, such as *rendang* or culinary batik, have the potential to give rise to cultural identity disputes that can damage the harmony of bilateral relations. This emphasizes that even though culinary diplomacy is soft, strategic management that is sensitive to the political and cultural dynamics of partner countries is still needed.

Indonesia's culinary diplomacy strategy also plays an important role in shaping the national narrative in the regional geopolitical map. When major powers such as China and the United States compete through economic and military influence in Southeast Asia, Indonesia chooses a more subtle approach through cultural power. By utilizing the inclusive and cross-border appeal of culinary, Indonesia creates an alternative diplomatic space that is not confrontational. This strategy underlines Indonesia's position as a moderate country that prioritizes peace and cultural collaboration in building regional stability. In this case, culinary diplomacy functions as a bridge in relations between interests that are often not politically aligned.

However, the success of culinary diplomacy requires a strong foundation, both in terms of policy and resources. Coordination between government institutions such as the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Trade is key to ensuring the effectiveness of this strategy across sectors. In addition, there needs to be an increase in the capacity of human resources in the culinary industry, especially those with global competence in terms of presentation, cultural narratives, and the use of digital technology. If culinary diplomacy is only interpreted as food promotion without an integrated cultural and economic strategy, then its potential will be limited.

Therefore, strengthening institutions and innovation are the main requirements to ensure that culinary diplomacy truly becomes a pillar of Indonesia's adaptive and competitive foreign policy amidst the complexity of today's geopolitics.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that culinary diplomacy has become an important instrument in Indonesia's foreign policy, especially in strengthening bilateral relations in the Southeast Asian region. Through a non-confrontational culture-based approach, Indonesia has succeeded in building bridges of communication and cross-country cooperation amidst increasingly complex regional geopolitical competition. This strategy has proven to be able to improve Indonesia's positive image in the eyes of the international community, strengthen the country's position in regional geopolitical affairs, and create more inclusive and participatory relations between nations.

The findings also show that culinary diplomacy is not only beneficial in terms of culture, but also has significant economic and social impacts. Increasing food exports, promoting culinary SMEs, and developing gastronomic tourism are concrete forms of culinary diplomacy's contribution to the local economy. In addition, the participation of the private sector and the community in culinary promotion shows that culinary diplomacy can be a collaborative platform that benefits various parties. However, the success of this strategy depends on policy consistency, program sustainability, and the ability to adapt to market dynamics and global consumer tastes.

As part of the implementation of the results of this study, it is recommended that the Indonesian government strengthen the institutional framework of culinary diplomacy by establishing a special cross-ministerial unit that focuses on international culinary promotion. This unit can design a more systematic promotional strategy, including the development of a national culinary narrative, standardization of export food quality, and integration of culinary campaigns with cultural, economic, and tourism diplomacy. In addition, training and education for culinary industry players also need to be improved so that they have cross-cultural communication skills and understand the importance of the symbolic value of food in the context of diplomacy.

The next recommendation is to encourage innovation and digitalization in promoting Indonesian culinary. The government can collaborate with digital platforms and social media to reach the global market more effectively, especially the younger generation who are more connected to the virtual world. The use of technology, such as virtual culinary tours, interactive promotions based on short videos, and creatively curated digital campaigns will provide added value to Indonesia's culinary diplomacy strategy. With an innovative, collaborative, and data-driven approach, Indonesian culinary diplomacy has great potential to continue to develop as a relevant, effective, and impactful foreign policy instrument in facing current and future geopolitical challenges.

## ADVANCED RESEARCH

Although this study provides a comprehensive overview of the role of Indonesian culinary diplomacy in strengthening bilateral relations in Southeast Asia, there are several limitations that need to be noted. First, the qualitative approach used in this study is descriptive and has not measured the impact of culinary diplomacy quantitatively, such as its influence on increasing food trade volume, tourist flows, or

foreign public perceptions of Indonesia. In addition, the geographical focus of the study is still limited to the Southeast Asian region and has not examined how similar strategies are implemented in other regions such as Europe, the Middle East, or Latin America which may have different geopolitical and cultural contexts.

For further research, it is recommended to conduct quantitative studies based on field data or surveys to measure the effectiveness of culinary diplomacy in shaping public opinion, its influence on the growth of the culinary tourism sector, or its contribution to creating local economic resilience. Comparative research between countries can also be conducted to examine the differences in culinary diplomacy approaches between Indonesia and other countries that have similar strategies, such as South Korea, Thailand, or Japan. In addition, further studies on the use of digital technology and social media in promoting culinary diplomacy in real-time can enrich the understanding of the adaptation of diplomacy strategies in an increasingly virtually connected global era.

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