PUBLICIO JURNAL ILMIAH POLITIK, KEBIJAKAN DAN SOSIAL

E-ISSN : 2656-0305

DOI : https://doi.org/10.51747/qsj4mj762

# POWER AMIDST THE RUINS: CLASICAL REALISM AND INDONESIA'S EARTHQUAKE AID

Ilham Dary Athallah[1],Hayara Khairia[2], Tsabita Husna[3], Nadine Rizqi Auliya[4],Nadhifa Salma Salsabilla[5]

UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya[1,4,5]
The University of Western Australia[2]
Universitas Gadjah Mada[3]

ilham.dary@uinsa.ac.id

**ABSTRACT**

This article examines Indonesia's humanitarian assistance after the February 2023 Turkiye-Syria earthquake as a case of realist statecraft. It asks to what extent a mission framed as compassion also advanced national interest, prestige, alliance reciprocity, and influence. Using a qualitative single-case design, the study applies classical realism, especially Morgenthau's claim that foreign policy is guided by interest defined as power. The analysis draws on official Indonesian statements, aid-deployment records, and contemporaneous media coverage. The findings show that Indonesia's response displayed state capacity through high-profile military and medical deployments, reciprocated Turkiye's earlier assistance to Indonesia, and reinforced a strategically useful partnership with Ankara. Aid to Syria complicates a purely realist reading because it offered limited direct return, but the anomaly does not overturn the wider pattern. The article argues that humanitarian action can operate as strategic signaling in low-politics domains. Its contribution is to extend classical realism into disaster diplomacy while specifying the conditions under which compassion and power politics converge

**Keywords:** Indonesia; Humanitarian assistance; Classical Realism; Türkiye–Syria Earthquake 2023; National Interest; Disaster Diplomacy; Morgenthau

## 1. INTRODUCTION

On 6 February 2023, a catastrophic series of earthquakes struck southern Türkiye and neighboring Syria, killing over 50,000 people in Türkiye and more than 7,000 in Syria (Goniewicz et al. 2024). The scale of destruction triggered a massive international humanitarian response (UN OCHA 2023; Goniewicz et al. 2024). Among the responders was Indonesia, which, despite being geographically distant, launched one of its largest overseas aid missions to date. Within days, Indonesia dispatched search-and-rescue teams, medical units, relief supplies, and military transport aircraft to the disaster zone (ANTARA 2023a; ANTARA 2023b). President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) framed this effort as part of Indonesia's ongoing "humanitarian diplomacy" (ANTARA 2023a), underscoring the country's solidarity with "our brothers

and sisters" in Türkiye and Syria (ANTARA 2023a). At face value, Indonesia's response appeared to be a purely humanitarian gesture of a compassionate nation. However, this paper probes a deeper question: To what extent can Indonesia's aid be interpreted as a power-political instrument rather than (or in addition to) purely altruistic action?

This question addresses a gap in the existing literature on disaster response and foreign policy. Studies of international humanitarian assistance often emphasize moral duty, international cooperation, and soft power gains, frequently drawing on liberal or constructivist perspectives (for example, the concept of "humanitarian diplomacy" focuses on cooperation and moral responsibility). Few analyses explicitly apply a realist framework to humanitarian aid, in part because such crises are traditionally seen as belonging to the domain of "low politics (humanitarian and economic issues) rather than the high politics of power and security. Classical realist theory, epitomized by thinkers like Hans Morgenthau and E. H. Carr, centers on power, national interest, and competition among states (Morgenthau 1948, 5; Carr 1946, 75–87). At first glance, a humanitarian mission for earthquake relief seems an unlikely venue for power politics. This study contends, however, that even in this ostensibly altruistic context, considerations of national interest defined in terms of power may have been at play. By examining Indonesia's earthquake aid through a classical realist lens, the paper seeks to fill the interpretive gap and offer a more precise understanding of the motives behind the aid.

Classical realism posits that states are driven by an endless struggle for power and security in an anarchic international system (Schweller 1997). Morgenthau's famous dictum holds that statesmen "think and act in terms of interest defined as power" (Morgenthau 1948, 5). In this view, foreign policy actions – even those couched in idealistic or moral language – fundamentally serve the national interest and the accumulation of power. E. H. Carr likewise argued that purportedly universal principles often mask particularistic interests of powerful nations (Carr 1946, 87–88). All realists share a pessimistic worldview that sees international politics as a "perpetual struggle" for security, prestige, and power (Schweller 1997). From such a perspective, international aid might be used to gain prestige or influence, strengthen alliances, or project power subtly, even as it provides genuine relief. Morgenthau himself noted that humanitarian or moral claims in international politics often accompany power pursuits, serving to justify or cloak the real interests at stake (Morgenthau 1948,10–12; Carr 1946,102–103). These insights prompt us to ask whether Indonesia's aid to Turkey and Syria was influenced – consciously or not – by a desire to advance its national interest (enhancing its international stature, reciprocity with an ally, and strategic influence), rather than being a purely selfless act.

The core research question guiding this paper is: To what extent can Indonesia's humanitarian aid response to the 2023 Türkiye–Syria earthquake be interpreted as driven by national interest and power-political considerations, as opposed to purely humanitarian motivations? The objective is not to deny the genuine compassion in Indonesia's response, but to assess whether classical realist factors were significant in shaping the scale, form, and focus of that response. In pursuing this inquiry, the paper makes several contributions. Empirically, it provides a detailed analysis of Indonesia's aid operation – the personnel, assets, diplomacy, and rhetoric involved – drawing on official statements, news accounts, and secondary analyses. Theoretically, it applies classical realist concepts to a non-traditional case, testing the boundaries of realism's explanatory power in the domain of disaster relief. In doing so, it illustrates how power and interest can manifest in the context of humanitarian action, thereby extending realism's relevance to what is conventionally seen as the domain of low politics. The study also brings in insights from Islamic International Relations where relevant, noting how ideas of Muslim solidarity (ummah) and

the public good (maslaha) were invoked in Indonesia's narrative – yet arguing that these ideational factors can themselves be harnessed in service of state interest. Overall, the paper demonstrates that Indonesia's humanitarian aid, while saving lives and alleviating suffering, simultaneously served as a tool of statecraft to increase Indonesia's prestige and strategic position.

The scope of this research is deliberately focused. It is a single-case study of Indonesia's response to a specific event – the February 2023 earthquake affecting Turkiye and Syria. While this allows in-depth process-tracing and contextual understanding, the findings are not automatically generalizable to all states or humanitarian crises. Indonesia has unique characteristics (such as its leadership role in the Muslim world and its past experience with disasters) that may shape its motivations. This study also emphasizes the perspective of state decision-makers and official policy; it does not attempt to evaluate the on-the-ground effectiveness of the aid or the experiences of aid recipients. The ethical question of whether aid should serve national interest is beyond our scope – our concern is explanatory, not prescriptive. Finally, by concentrating on a classical realist interpretation, we acknowledge that other theoretical lenses (constructivist, liberal, etc.) could highlight different drivers; these will be addressed in the discussion as counterpoints.

## 2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative single-case study design, focusing on Indonesia's humanitarian response to the 2023 Türkiye–Syria earthquake as the unit of analysis. The rationale for a single-case approach is the opportunity to conduct a context-specific examination of both the decision-making process and the content of Indonesia's aid effort. Indonesia's response is treated as a "least likely" case for the application of classical realist theory.

In methodological terms, a least-likely case is one in which the theory being tested would ostensibly have a low probability of explaining the outcomes; thus, if the theory still finds support, its credibility is strengthened (Schweller 1997). Humanitarian disaster relief is generally seen as motivated by empathy, international norms, or domestic pressure rather than power politics. Realism's usual terrain is great-power rivalry, security conflicts, and balance-of-power diplomacy – far removed from the cooperative, altruistic ethos of humanitarian aid. By selecting an extreme case where realist expectations are minimal, we set up a tough test: if evidence of interest-driven behavior emerges even here, it suggests classical realism can extend into domains it is not commonly applied to. This strategy increases the study's theory-testing value. It also aligns with Morgenthau's claim that the pursuit of interest underlies all political action, even when obscured by moralistic rhetoric (Morgenthau 1948,10–12); our case allows us to probe that claim under unlikely conditions. The findings from a least-likely case, while not broadly generalizable, provide a critical existence proof for the phenomenon of interest-driven humanitarianism, and they generate hypotheses that could be tested in other cases or with comparative designs in future research.

The study's evidentiary limits are treated as design boundaries rather than weaknesses. Because the paper relies on public documents, it does not infer private motives directly from elite deliberations. Instead, it evaluates whether the observable pattern of action and discourse is consistent with realist expectations. This distinction should remain explicit: the paper explains the political function of the aid mission, not the private psychology of Indonesian decision-makers. It also clarifies why the Syria anomaly is analytically useful: it marks the boundary between general humanitarian solidarity and the more specific realist mechanisms that organize the Turkiye-focused evidence and prevents the paper from overclaiming

realism's explanatory reach while keeping the causal argument testable and internally bounded for a single-case qualitative design in International Relations scholarship.

The case is selected because it is a demanding test for classical realism. Disaster relief is usually read as altruistic, cooperative, or norm-driven, making the Turkiye-Syria earthquake response a least-likely site for a power-political explanation. If evidence of prestige, reciprocity, and influence projection appears in this setting, the paper can show that realist logic travels beyond military confrontation and bargaining. The design therefore does not claim that compassion was absent. It tests whether the scale, visibility, and institutional form of Indonesia's response were also structured by interest defined as power.

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Classical realism is retained as the paper's single analytical framework. Following Morgenthau, the study treats national interest as a claim about power rather than as a synonym for material security alone (Morgenthau 1948). Power is operationalized through three observable forms: prestige, understood as the public display of state capacity; reciprocal alliance investment, understood as aid that sustains expectations of future support; and security-oriented influence projection, understood as the use of humanitarian engagement to reinforce strategic access, trust, and diplomatic standing. Carr's critique of moral universalism supports this framework because it warns that appeals to solidarity often coexist with particular interests (Carr 1946). Schweller's account of status and alliance behavior further clarifies why a middle power may use non-military instruments to improve its relative position (Schweller, 1997).

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Results

In this section, we present the empirical findings of our case study, organized according to the three theoretical dimensions identified: prestige politics, reciprocal alliance behavior, and influence projection. Each subsection details the evidence found for that dimension in Indonesia's earthquake response. We then note any anomalies or counterevidence, particularly regarding the Syrian aid component, which deviated from the main pattern. The results draw heavily on contemporaneous reports and statements, providing a richly sourced narrative of what Indonesia did and said during the crisis.

The evidence is reorganized around the three theoretical categories rather than around the chronology of deployment. The first category is prestige politics, where the relevant evidence is the visibility and scale of the mission. The second is reciprocal alliance investment, where the relevant evidence is Indonesia's repeated reference to Turkiye's earlier help during Indonesian disasters. The third is security-oriented influence projection, where the relevant evidence is the use of state and military assets in coordination with Turkish authorities. The Syria component is treated as an anomaly that limits, but does not erase, the realist interpretation. Demonstrating Capability and Status

Unprecedented Scale and Publicity: Indonesian officials themselves highlighted that this was the largest international humanitarian operation Indonesia had ever undertaken (Dewi and Qodarsasi 2024). Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Culture Muhadjir Effendy, who led the government delegation to Turkey, stated proudly: "This humanitarian mission for Turkey is the biggest mission carried out by our government to help friendly countries which we have been doing so far." (ANTARA 2023b).

This emphasis on the biggest mission underscores a conscious recognition of the mission's magnitude. It implies that Indonesia deliberately went big – deploying more personnel and aid volume than in any prior relief effort abroad – and wanted that fact to be known. The numbers bear this out: over 250 Indonesian personnel were sent to Turkey, including a 47-member search-and-rescue team (INASAR), a 119-member emergency medical team, and support units (Sulistyoet al. 2023; ANTARA 2023c). Indonesia dispatched at least five military and chartered aircraft loaded with supplies over multiple waves (ANTARA 2023b; ANTARA 2023a). By February 23 (a little over two weeks after the quake), Indonesia had delivered some 110–140 tons of aid items (food, medical supplies, winter equipment) to Turkey and Syria (ANTARA 2023a) . Setting up a fully equipped field hospital in Hatay province was another high-visibility component (ANTARA 2023a) – it demonstrated medical prowess, with capacity for emergency surgeries and treating 1̃20 patients a day (ANTARA 2023a). These figures and assets were widely reported in media, often citing officials, which indicates an intention to gain recognition for the scale of help. The deployment of four Indonesian Air Force aircraft (including the workhorse Hercules C-130 transport planes) for ferrying aid was particularly symbolic (ANTARA 2023a). Not only did these aircraft deliver Indonesian aid to Turkish soil, but one Hercules was reportedly offered to assist within Turkey for transporting relief goods and even victims between affected areas (ANTARA 2023b). That effectively placed an Indonesian military asset in operational use under Turkish coordination – a strong statement of Indonesia's capability and willingness to contribute. In Jakarta, President Jokowi held a send-off ceremony at Halim Air Base for the aid flights, giving the mission high-level political endorsement and media coverage (ANTARA 2023a). He explicitly framed it as Indonesia continuing its humanitarian diplomacy (ANTARA 2023a). Such public framing not only justified the mission domestically but also served to elevate Indonesia's profile internationally as a nation that takes on significant humanitarian roles.

Acknowledgment of Turkey's Past Assistance: Multiple Indonesian statements referenced Turkey's prompt and generous aid to Indonesia during prior disasters, making a direct link to why Indonesia was now helping Turkey. Coordinating Minister Muhadjir Effendy, while in Hatay handing over aid, stated: "the Turkish government and their people are also present when Indonesia experienced disasters, such as during the Aceh tsunami in 2004 and the Palu earthquake in 2018" (ANTARA 2023b). He went on to provide vivid detail: after the 2004 tsunami, Turkish aid arrived earlier than that of many other countries, and Turkey even built a "Turkey Village" in Aceh as part of reconstruction (ANTARA 2023b). This village (also known as "Turkish Red Crescent Village") stands as a lasting symbol of Turkish solidarity with Indonesia. By citing these examples, Effendy explicitly cast Indonesia's current aid as a reciprocal gesture – a way of saying "Turkey was there for us, now we are here for Turkey." Such rhetoric is a textbook illustration of alliance politics: it reminds both domestic and Turkish audiences of the bond forged through mutual help. Notably, he mentioned that Turkey's help in Aceh was earlier than other countries, underscoring a special gratitude towards Turkey (ANTARA 2023b). This implicitly elevates Turkey to a higher tier of friends whose needs Indonesia prioritizes. Similarly, President Jokowi's remarks at the aid send-off included praise for Turkey's support to Indonesia (though the ANTARA English piece did not directly quote this, the context suggests he acknowledged Turkey's prior help) and then pivoted to Indonesia's readiness to assist Turkey and Syria (ANTARA 2023a). The historical reciprocity narrative was thus central.

Indonesia's policymakers are well aware that Turkey is a major regional power and a key player in the Islamic world. In recent years, Indonesia–Turkey relations have included growing defense cooperation – for example, joint development of medium tanks and Indonesia's purchase of Turkish-made drones and

arms systems, as well as intelligence sharing on counter-terrorism (Robby and Boran 2024). In 2022, the two countries elevated ties by signing cooperation agreements (including economic partnerships aiming for $10 billion in trade) and discussing a strategic partnership framework (Robby and Boran 2024). All this forms the backdrop to 2023's disaster response. By aiding Turkey robustly, Indonesia likely aimed to solidify these ties at a crucial moment. There is evidence to suggest that Indonesia saw the aid as reinforcing Turkey's stability and their bilateral partnership, which aligns with Indonesia's security interests. For instance, the Indonesian aid included not just immediate relief but also post-disaster support plans. One report noted that the Indonesian government was planning to assist Turkey in rehabilitation and reconstruction phases (citing a coordinating minister's meeting and Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform's involvement) (Dewi and Qodarsasi 2024). Such longer-term assistance indicates that Indonesia wanted to be deeply involved in Turkey's recovery – a role that would keep Indonesia engaged in Turkey's domestic rebuilding and hence maintain influence. Additionally, Indonesia responded to Turkey's specific requests, such as sending 10,000 vials of tetanus vaccine to prevent post-quake disease outbreaks (Sulistyo et al. 2023). Meeting these targeted needs not only saved lives but also showed that Indonesia was attuned to Turkey's security (health security in this case) concerns. Another example: the dispatch of the EMT and field hospital was partially in response to Turkey's request for international medical teams (Sulistyo et al. 2023). By promptly fulfilling that, Indonesia positioned itself as a reliable partner that can deliver critical aid on request – exactly the kind of partner one values in times of security crisis.

Indonesia included Syria – a country with which it has minimal strategic ties – in its relief efforts. President Jokowi's announcement made clear that aid was being sent "to Turkey and to Syria" (ANTARA 2023a). One of the four Hercules aircraft dispatched on February 21, 2023 carried supplies destined for Damascus (ANTARA 2023a). This aid to Syria is puzzling from a pure power perspective. Syria under the Assad regime is internationally isolated, war-ravaged, and holds little direct geopolitical importance for Indonesia. Unlike Turkey, Syria has not been a notable partner or benefactor for Indonesia. So why did Indonesia bother to send assistance there, especially as Syria's crisis is complicated by sanctions and political sensitivities? The data suggest a couple of reasons, none of which align cleanly with power-politics: humanitarian concern for Syrian civilians and a sense of Islamic solidarity. Indonesia has a tradition of supporting humanitarian causes in the Muslim world (e.g., Palestine, Rohingya) based on popular sentiment and moral principle. It's likely that domestic public opinion and Islamic groups expected the government not to ignore the plight in Syria while helping Turkey. Indeed, one Indonesian NGO (Dompet Dhuafa) raised donations and worked with the government in sending aid, highlighting public enthusiasm to help all victims (Dompet Dhuafa 2023; VOI 2023a). From a constructivist lens, the ummah (Muslim community) concept may have spurred Indonesia to act as a responsible leader who doesn't discriminate between Turkish and Syrian Muslims in need. The Islamic IR perspective would emphasize norms of brotherhood and maslaha (the common good) driving this behavior.

The results therefore support a bounded realist interpretation. Indonesia's aid was not reducible to self-interest, but its most distinctive features were interest-bearing: the mission was conspicuous, reciprocally framed, and institutionally tied to a strategic partner. The anomaly of Syria narrows the theory's scope rather than refuting it. Classical realism explains why Indonesia's response became unusually large, visible, and state-centered, while normative accounts explain why the aid was extended beyond the most strategically valuable recipient.

### 4.2. Discussion

Indonesia's response to the 2023 Türkiye–Syria earthquake can now be interpreted in light of classical realist theory, bearing in mind the empirical patterns and anomalies identified. In this discussion, we synthesize the findings into a coherent argument and engage with counterarguments from other perspectives. We assert a clear thesis: Indonesia's humanitarian aid was fundamentally interest-driven, serving as a tool of statecraft to increase national power (through prestige, alliance ties, and influence), even as it was outwardly framed as altruistic assistance. This thesis does not deny that compassion and norms played a role, but it posits that the decisive impetus and shaping force behind the aid effort were calculations of national interest consistent with classical realism.

A primary driver of Indonesia's aid effort was to increase its prestige – the respect and admiration it commands internationally – which classical realism recognizes as a form of power. By executing a conspicuously large and effective humanitarian mission, Indonesia sought to elevate its status as a capable and benevolent actor, thereby augmenting its national power in the diplomatic domain.

As detailed in the results, Indonesia undertook its largest-ever overseas humanitarian mission, a fact officials emphasized publicly (ANTARA 2023b). The deployment of significant military assets (Hercules aircraft, hundreds of personnel) and the establishment of facilities like a field hospital signaled capabilities on par with much richer or militarily advanced nations (ANTARA 2023b; ANTARA 2023a). Indonesian leaders actively publicized these actions – President Jokowi personally announced the aid and called it "humanitarian diplomacy" (ANTARA 2023a), while Minister Effendy emphasized the unprecedented scale (ANTARA 2023b). These are deliberate prestige moves: they draw attention to Indonesia's strengths (logistics, medical teams, SAR expertise). The payoff in prestige was evident when Turkey's President Erdogan praised the Indonesian team in front of others (ANTARA 2023c), effectively endorsing Indonesia's importance. Such accolades and Indonesia's visible role in the international response effort enhanced its standing among peer states and within international organizations.

Classical realist theory, via Morgenthau, holds that demonstrating power (prestige) is a core objective of states (Morgenthau 1948, ch. 6). Prestige is not vanity for its own sake; it is instrumentally important because it can deter challenges and attract allies. Morgenthau wrote that the policy of prestige attempts to convince others of one's power by the display of that power (Morgenthau 1948, ch. 6). Here, Indonesia's display was its humanitarian-military prowess. The recognition gained can translate into soft power that complements hard power. For instance, if Indonesia is seen as a responsible leader, it might gain more influence in diplomatic negotiations or leadership roles in multilateral fora (which is exactly what a rising middle power like Indonesia seeks). Schweller's observation that realists see perpetual struggles for prestige and power (Schweller 1997) is exemplified here – Indonesia engaged in a peaceful competition of goodwill, in effect a status contest with other aid-providing nations (and it arguably won, given the size of its mission relative to its GDP). Boosting prestige through humanitarian action is a low-risk strategy that avoids military confrontation yet still builds the nation's "reputation power." This aligns with a realist understanding that states will use all available means, not just coercion, to maximize their relative power. In sum, Indonesia's prestige gains from the aid can be viewed as accumulation of power resources (international legitimacy, trust, and influence) which classical realism would count as serving the national interest (Morgenthau 1948, 5).

Indonesia provided extensive aid to Turkiye because Turkey is a valued ally/partner, and helping Turkey would cement reciprocal support. In realist terms, Indonesia's national interest was served by

strengthening an alliance that contributes to its security and regional influence. The aid can thus be seen as a form of power-balancing or alliance maintenance, ensuring that Turkey remains positively disposed of and that the bilateral power equation favors Indonesia's interests.

Indonesian officials explicitly tied the aid to Turkey's past support of Indonesia (Aceh 2004, Palu 2018) (ANTARA 2023b), framing it as returning a favor among friends. This shows an expectation of ongoing give-and-take – a classic alliance feature. The language of "close brotherly relations" (ANTARA 2023b) and the presence of high-level coordination (Jokowi calling Erdogan, ministers meeting to plan aid) (ANTARA 2023c; Sulistyo et al. 2023) indicate that Indonesia treated this not as charity to a stranger but as a strategic duty to an ally. The significant resources committed make sense in this light; Indonesia would likely not mobilize five airplanes and hundreds of personnel for a country with which it had no important ties. Turkey's strategic weight (NATO member, key in Middle East) means that having Turkey's gratitude and friendship increases Indonesia's geopolitical leverage – e.g., Turkey might support Indonesia's positions in international forums or collaborate more closely on defense tech. Indeed, after the aid, one could observe continued Indonesia-Turkiye engagement (though our data doesn't extend far beyond the immediate crisis, anecdotal evidence is that relations stayed warm and Turkey later offered condolences and support when Indonesia had disasters or on global issues). Realist logic also sees alliances as a way to balance power – while Indonesia and Turkey are not balancing against a common enemy per se, they do provide each other with strategic depth in international politics (one in Southeast Asia, one in the Mediterranean, sharing intelligence on terrorism, etc.). The aid therefore fed into a balancing act: it helped ensure Turkey's resilience (keeping Turkey strong benefits Indonesia as it keeps a friendly power resilient ) and balanced influence by making Indonesia an indispensable partner to Turkey, arguably to counter other influences (for example, if Indonesia hadn't stepped up, perhaps another country like China or a Gulf state might gain more favor in Turkey by offering aid; Indonesia's action helped preclude that scenario, protecting its share of influence).

Realist theory, especially as articulated by E. H. Carr, emphasizes that power underlies so-called moral or cooperative acts (Morgenthau 1948). Alliances are seen as pragmatic arrangements to advance mutual power interests. Carr argued that what idealists call "international solidarity" often aligns with the interests of those in alliance (Carr 1946, 44). In our case, the solidarity between Indonesia and Turkey is underpinned by mutual interest – each is a significant Muslim-majority country that can help the other extend influence in their regions and support each other's security. Indonesia's aid can be interpreted through the lens of neoclassical realism, which incorporates both systemic and domestic factors: systemically, Indonesia saw an opportunity to ensure a friendly balance of power (keeping Turkey – a fellow middle power – aligned and capable, contributing to a more multipolar world not dominated by great powers alone); at the unit level, Indonesian leaders perceived Turkey as part of its extended circle of national interest, thus justifying significant resource allocation. Hans Morgenthau also noted that nations pursue policies to maintain the balance of power and secure allies as part of that strategy (Morgenthau 1948, 5; Carr, 1946). By stepping up in Turkey's crisis, Indonesia reaffirmed itself as a reliable ally – which is essentially a currency in balance-of-power politics. The reward is an ally's loyalty and possibly expectation of future support, which is a strategic asset. This reciprocity dynamic aligns perfectly with realist notions of alliances formed on the basis of national advantage rather than sentiment. Thus, what superficially looks like altruistic solidarity can be recast as rational policy to strengthen a partnership that ultimately enhances Indonesia's own power position.

Beyond immediate relief, Indonesia used the aid operation to increase its influence in a region

of interest and to further its strategic objectives, such as displaying its military's operational reach and reinforcing norms that benefit its foreign policy. In doing so, Indonesia treated humanitarian assistance as an extension of its security strategy by other means.

The integration of Indonesia's military in the mission and coordination with Turkiye's security apparatus (AFAD, military transport of victims, etc.) (ANTARA 2023b) suggests that this was also a confidence-building measure between the two countries' militaries and governments. Indonesia's Air Force operating in Turkish airspace, Indonesian medics working under Turkish disaster authority – these create inter-operability and trust. Strategically, Indonesia gained on several fronts: it improved readiness for its own forces (experience in international disaster response, which can translate to better readiness for other deployments including UN peacekeeping or ASEAN missions); it possibly gained influence in how the relief operations were carried out (having a say in aiding Hatay region gave it a presence on the ground); and it reinforced its narrative of being a leader among Muslim nations in helping in crises, which bolsters its diplomatic influence in the OIC. Aiding Syria (though less obviously interest-driven) could be seen as Indonesia wanting a foothold or moral authority in discussions on the Syrian conflict and humanitarian access – aligning with its principle of non-interference but support for humanitarian intervention under UN aegis. This can enhance Indonesia's credibility when it speaks about conflicts in international forums, thus indirectly amplifying its influence. We also see that Indonesia's humanitarian diplomacy is part of a broader strategic doctrine: Jokowi's administration has emphasized a "free and active" foreign policy that includes contributing to global peace and welfare. Being active in Turkey's disaster response increases Indonesia's clout in shaping international disaster management norms (for instance, pushing for better disaster preparedness cooperation, which Indonesia can lead in ASEAN and beyond). Realist thought can accommodate this as the pursuit of "milieu goals" – shaping the international environment in ways conducive to one's interest, as opposed to just possession goals. Here, Indonesia's milieu goal might be a world where major states come to each other's aid (knowing it, too, might need aid and would prefer a norm of mutual assistance), and where it as a middle power has a say.

Classical realists like Morgenthau acknowledged that national interest could encompass non-military aims, depending on the political context (Morgenthau 1948, 29–30). The content of interest is not fixed; what remains constant is that states seek a favorable position for themselves (Morgenthau 1948,29–30). In 2023, part of Indonesia's interest was to elevate its role in global governance (in line with being a G20 member and aspirant regional leader). Helping Turkey was a means to that end – it allowed Indonesia to exercise leadership and gain influence without contradicting its core principle of peaceful engagement. Furthermore, realism's principle that states operate in a self-help system and aim to ensure their own security can be broadened: contributing to Turkey's stability is indirectly a contribution to a stable balance in regions that could affect Indonesia's security (for example, preventing further destabilization in the Middle East, which can fuel global terrorism – something Indonesia has suffered from in the past; a stable Turkey is a bulwark against chaos spilling over). This is aligned with the idea of enlightened self-interest – a realist concept that sometimes the best way to secure your interest is to help others in a way that creates an environment favorable to you (Carr 1946, 44; Morgenthau 1948). Indonesia's influence grew as a result of the aid: Turkey and others saw it as a responsible stakeholder, possibly giving it more weight in dialogues (for instance, Turkey might listen more to Indonesia on issues like Rohingya or Palestine after experiencing Indonesia's generosity). These strategic benefits reflect a rational calculation of gains in influence and security from the humanitarian mission. Thus, in realist terms, Indonesia employed aid as an instrument of power projection, albeit a soft power projection that

complements its hard power limitations. This resonates with neoclassical realism, which often examines how domestic incentives (like desire for prestige or regime legitimacy) and strategic environment together drive states to seek influence in varied ways.

What does this case tell us about realism's domain? It suggests that the line between "high politics" and "low politics" is more blurred than often assumed. Realism traditionally focuses on security and power in conflicts, but Indonesia's disaster relief case shows that power pursuits permeate even humanitarian endeavors. Morgenthau's assertion that the political man thinks in interest terms rings true even in a scenario of charity (Morgenthau 1948, 5). This extends classical realism's applicability to humanitarian policy, an area typically commandeered by liberal and constructivist narratives. It demonstrates that realist analysis can reveal strategic substrata beneath noble actions – states remain states, seeking advantage and security, whether sending soldiers with guns or with rescue dogs. However, our case also hints at the need for realism to be open to integrating non-material factors (like identity) as part of the interest calculus, something that newer realist approaches (neoclassical realism, strategic culture) do. Indonesia's Islamic identity and normative commitments shaped how it pursued its interest, a nuance classical realism can acknowledge without losing its core focus (interest as power). In effect, Indonesia's behavior validates the realist view that morality and interest often coincide not by accident but design (Morgenthau 1948,10–12) – Indonesia's leaders managed to do well (for their state power) by doing good (humanitarian aid).

The theoretical implication is narrower and stronger than a generic claim that humanitarianism is strategic. The case suggests that classical realism travels into disaster diplomacy when three conditions coincide: the recipient is strategically meaningful, the donor can make a visible capability display, and officials can connect the action to prior reciprocity. Turkiye satisfied all three conditions, while Syria satisfied only the humanitarian and solidarity conditions. This contrast gives the paper its strongest contribution. It shows that realist explanation is most persuasive not when aid exists, but when aid becomes unusually large, publicly staged, and institutionally tied to a valued partner. Normative motives explain why Indonesia helped; realist logic explains why the help took the visible and state-centered form it did.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This research set out to investigate whether Indonesia's humanitarian aid to victims of the February 2023 Türkiye–Syria earthquake was motivated by power-political interests rather than being purely altruistic. Through a classical realist analysis, supported by extensive empirical evidence, we find that Indonesia's aid was indeed strongly interest-driven, although couched in the language of compassion and solidarity. In answer to the core research question: Indonesia's aid can be interpreted to a considerable extent as a power-political instrument – a means of pursuing national interest defined in terms of increased prestige, strengthened alliances, and stronger strategic influence – rather than as an entirely selfless humanitarian act.

Indonesia's relief mission, the largest it has ever mounted abroad, provided clear benefits to Indonesia's international standing. It demonstrated Indonesia's capacity and resolve, earning it prestige and gratitude on the world stage. It also functioned as a diplomatic investment in the Indonesia–Turkey partnership, reciprocating Turkey's past support and locking in future goodwill. It also enabled Indonesia to project soft power into a region of strategic interest, aligning with and reinforcing its broader foreign policy goals. These outcomes align closely with classical realist expectations that states seek to maximize power and security, even through ostensibly benign activities. While humanitarian concern was genuine, it

operated in tandem with, and was leveraged by, a rational calculation of national advantage. The anomaly of aid to Syria, driven more by normative and identity considerations, does not overturn the overall conclusion; rather, it highlights that Indonesia skilfully merged moral responsibility with interest – a point Morgenthau himself would recognize, as he noted statesmen often try to make interest look morally appropriate.

This case study contributes to International Relations theory by extending the applicability of classical realism into the domain of disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. It provides an empirical illustration that "low politics" can be analyzed with the same realism that is applied to diplomacy and war. In doing so, it reinforces the classical realist claim of the ubiquity of interest defined as power in international affairs. The case further suggests that realism can accommodate and incorporate the role of ideational factors as part of a state's interest. Indonesia's Islamic solidarity and its pursuit of prestige are not in contradiction; they combined to serve the national interest. This supports a nuanced realist view (akin to neoclassical realism) that domestic identity and values can shape how interest is perceived and pursued, without negating the primacy of interest itself. By analyzing a case of humanitarian aid, the study also enriches the discourse on "disaster diplomacy" with a realistic angle, complementing existing studies that often focus on diplomacy's success or failure in easing conflicts. Here, we looked at how disaster response can be a venue for power politics, showing that realism and humanitarianism intersect in practice – a perspective not often highlighted in IR literature.

Building on this study, several avenues open up. Comparative studies could be done on strategic humanitarianism: do other middle powers (e.g., India, Brazil, Turkey itself) use disaster aid similarly as a foreign policy instrument? Such research could help validate whether what we observed with Indonesia is part of a broader trend of states weaponizing humanitarian goodwill in the service of soft power competition. Another area is to examine long-term effects: Did Indonesia's aid translate into measurable diplomatic returns (say, in Indonesia–Turkey trade deals, defense cooperation acceleration, or Turkey's support for Indonesia's initiatives)? Process-tracing those outcomes over a longer period would strengthen the case that interest was fulfilled. Also, exploring public opinion and elite perception in Indonesia about this aid could be insightful – did Indonesians view it as charity or as enhancing national pride? That has implications for the domestic foundations of such foreign policy moves.

## REFERENCES

1. ANTARA. (2023a, February 21). President Jokowi sends aid for earthquake victims in Turkey, Syria. ANTARA News (English).

2. ANTARA. (2023b, February 23). Indonesian delegation visits field hospital in Hassa, Turkey. ANTARA News (English)

3. ANTARA. (2023c, February 22). President Erdogan commends INASAR support in earthquake recovery. ANTARA News (English).

4. Carr, E. H. (1946). The twenty years' crisis, 1919–1939. Harper & Row. (Original work published 1939)

5. Dewi, S. M., & Qodarsasi, U. (2024). Enhancing disaster diplomacy between Indonesia and Turkey: The roles of non-state actors in collaborative governance during the 2023 earthquake. Jurnal Hubungan

Internasional, 12(2), 71–84.

6. Kelman, I. (2012). Disaster diplomacy: How disaster-related activities affect peace and conflict. International Affairs, 88(2), 363–380

7. Korab-Karpowicz, W. J. (2018). Political realism in international relations. In The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu

8. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. (2023, February). Indonesia's humanitarian aid for Turkey and Syria earthquake (Press release).

9. Morgenthau, H. J. (1948). Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace. Alfred A. Knopf.

10. Morgenthau, H. J. (1954). The six principles of political realism. In Politics among nations (2nd ed., pp. 3–15). Knopf.

11. Robby, H. M. F., & Boran, T. K. (2024). Mapping the potential of the strategic partnerships between Indonesia and Türkiye: Challenges and opportunities. Insight Turkey, 26(2), 159–179.

12. Schweller, R. L. (1997). New realist research on alliances: Refining, not refuting, Waltz's balancing proposition. American Political Science Review, 91(4), 927–930.

13. The Journal of International Relations Scholars. (2023). Leveraging natural disasters for diplomatic objectives in Indonesia–Turkey relations. The Journal of International Relations Scholars, 5(1), 80–88.

14. United Nations OCHA. (2023). Humanitarian response to the 2023 Turkey–Syria earthquakes (UN situation reports, February–March 2023).

15. VOI. (2023, November 12). Indonesia given OIC mandate to take action to stop war in Gaza. VOI. https://voi.id/en/berita/325789