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Universal Defense Strategy in Tackling Asymmetric Threats Through Cultural and Persuasive Approaches in Conflict-Prone Areas

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Agrarian conflicts often develop into asymmetric threats that disrupt regional resilience. This study analyzes land disputes between indigenous communities and PT Toba Pulp Lestari in Simalungun and formulates a holistic defense strategy based on cultural and persuasive approaches. Using a qualitative case study method, data were collected through interviews, observations, and documents, then tested through triangulation. The results show that conflicts arise due to power imbalances, information gaps, and overlapping regulations; repressive approaches actually worsen tensions. Applying the values of Habonaron Do Bona and persuasive communication has proven effective as a sustainable solution, expanding the concept of holistic defense based on local wisdom

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as an archipelagic country rich in natural resources, faces its own challenges in managing rights to land, forests, and coastal areas. According to data from the National Human Rights Commission, during the 2020–2025 period, there were over 1,200 agrarian conflict cases recorded across Indonesia, involving indigenous communities, local governments, businesses, and other parties. Most of these conflicts last a long time, recur, and often end in physical clashes, property damage, and even loss of life.

Simalungun Regency in North Sumatra Province is an area with high strategic value because it borders directly on the Lake Toba Area, which has been designated as a National Strategic Area for Tourism and the Creative Economy. This region also has the rich culture of the Simalungun indigenous people, which is still well preserved, as well as significant forest resources. However, on the other hand, Simalungun Regency is also noted as one of the areas with the highest agrarian conflict index in North Sumatra.

One of the longest-running land dispute cases with the widest impact is the conflict between indigenous communities in Pematang Sidamanik District and surrounding areas with PT Toba Pulp Lestari (TPL). This conflict has been going on for more than three decades, starting with the issuance of industrial plantation forest concessions in the late 1980s. Over time, the conflict has gone through ups and downs, but it has never reached a fair and sustainable resolution for both sides. The peak of the tension occurred in September 2025 when there was a physical clash between residents and the company's security personnel, resulting in dozens of people getting injured and damage to several facilities. The situation worsened in early 2026 with the issuance of a policy to revoke part of the business permits and plans for mass layoffs affecting thousands of company employees.

Based on a review of several previous studies, it can be seen that there is a fairly clear separation between research on total defense and research on agrarian conflicts. Most studies on total defense still focus on military defense aspects, foreign threats, and the role of the armed forces in maintaining territorial sovereignty. For example, the studies by Lubis (2021) and Siregar (2022) that discuss total defense mostly highlight military readiness and resilience against foreign threats.

Meanwhile, research discussing agrarian conflicts in Indonesia generally focuses on legal analysis, forest management policies, and the rights of indigenous communities. For example, Nasution's (2023) study of land disputes in North Sumatra only looks at violations of customary rights without linking them to the concept of national security and defense. Similarly, Sinaga's (2024) study mostly highlights the economic and social aspects of the conflict.

Based on these conditions, there is a significant research gap, namely that not many studies directly link domestic agrarian conflict as a form of asymmetric threat, and formulate its resolution through the perspective of total defense based on local wisdom. This study aims to fill that gap by offering an analytical framework that combines the concept of total defense, asymmetric threat theory, cultural capital, and persuasive communication.

The novelty of this research includes three main aspects: first, the conceptual contribution that expands the definition of national defense not just to military defense, but also to resolving domestic social and agrarian conflicts; second, the empirical contribution that presents a model for applying the cultural values of Habonaron Do Bona as a tool for regional security management; third, the policy contribution that provides operational recommendations that local governments and security forces can adopt in handling similar cases.

This research aims to analyze the forms of asymmetric threats, examine the role of cultural and persuasive approaches, and formulate a comprehensive total defense strategy to create sustainable regional resilience. Scientifically, this study is expected to enrich the body of knowledge on national resilience and conflict resolution, while practically, it can serve as a consideration for policymakers in handling similar cases in other areas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Total Defense

Universal Defense is a national defense system that is carried out comprehensively, integrally, and sustainably by all citizens, territories, and national resources. Based on Law Number 3 of 2002 on State Defense, the universal defense system is not limited to military power alone but includes all aspects of national life, covering ideology, politics, economy, society, culture, as well as defense and security.

The National Resilience Institute (2022) explains that universal defense aims to counter all forms of threats, disturbances, challenges, and obstacles, whether from abroad or within the country, in order to ensure the integrity of the territory, national sovereignty, and the safety of the nation. The main principle of universal defense is the involvement of all components of the nation, the unity between civil and military defense, and alignment with local conditions and culture.

Asymmetric Threat Theory

Asymmetric threats are defined as a type of threat that arises from a significant imbalance in power, capability, resources, and ways of fighting between conflicting parties. According to Jones & Smith (2021), in the context of domestic security, asymmetric threats often don't take the form of direct attacks, but rather social instability, unorganized military resistance, and damage to the pillars of community life.

A hallmark of asymmetric threats is that their development is hard to predict, they emerge gradually from accumulated injustices, and their impact can spread quickly if not managed with the right strategy. According to Rahmat & Sari (2023), structural inequalities—like gaps in access to law, capital, and information—are the main triggers for the emergence of asymmetric threats in the context of agrarian conflicts in Indonesia.

The Theory of Cultural Capital and Social Capital

Bourdieu (2019) explains that cultural capital is a set of values, norms, knowledge, traditions, and skills possessed by a group of people. Cultural capital not only serves as a group identity, but also becomes an important tool in the process of adapting and solving problems faced by the community.

Meanwhile, Putnam (2020) emphasizes that social capital in the form of mutual trust, cooperative norms, and strong social networks acts as a glue that can strengthen group solidarity and speed up dispute resolution processes. In the context of this study, the cultural approach refers to the use of these two forms of capital possessed by the Simalungun indigenous community.

Framework of Thinking

Here is the framework of thinking in the research that was conducted



Figure 1. Framework of Thinking

A Persuasive Approach to Security

According to Rogers & Steinfatt (2023), a persuasive approach is a communication process aimed at changing someone else's attitudes, views, and behavior through encouragement, explanation, and mutual understanding, rather than through force or violence. In the context of security management, Siahaan (2024) adds that a persuasive approach is very effective in preventing conflict escalation, building trust between parties, and creating lasting agreements because it is based on shared awareness.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with an in-depth case study design. This design was chosen based on the consideration that this study aims to understand the conflict phenomenon as a whole, in depth, and within the context of real-life situations in the field.

The research was carried out in the Pematang Sidamanik District, Sidamanik District, and Silimakuta District in Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra. This location was chosen because it is the main area where land disputes occur between the indigenous community and PT Toba Pulp Lestari. The research was conducted over five months, from January to May 2026..

Data Collection Techniques

In-depth Interview: Conducted with 25 respondents selected through purposive sampling, including: 5 traditional leaders and elders of the Simalungun community, 4 village and urban neighborhood officials, 5 relevant local government officers, 4 company representatives, and 7 community members directly affected by the conflict.

Field Observation: Conducted both participatively and non-participatively to observe the physical conditions of the disputed area, patterns of social interaction among the community, as well as the implementation of policies on the ground. The observation was carried out over three months with periodic visits to the location.

Document Study: Collecting and analyzing various official documents such as laws and regulations, forest utilization business permits, reports on conflict developments from relevant agencies, court rulings, as well as cultural and historical documents of indigenous communities.

Data Analysis and Validity Techniques

The data is processed through three stages of analysis according to Miles and Huberman: data reduction to select relevant information, data presentation in the form of a narrative, and drawing conclusions and verification. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, this study uses source triangulation (comparing information from various parties) and method triangulation (comparing interview results with observations and documents).

RESEARCH RESULT

The Dynamics of History and Conflict Development

This land dispute started back in 1987 when the government issued a Timber Forest Product Utilization Business License (IUPHHK) for an area of around 28,000 hectares in Simalungun Regency. The local indigenous community only realized in the early 1990s that most of the land recognized as their ancestral ulayat land had been included in the company's concession area. Since then, there have been various negotiation efforts, mediations, and protests from the residents, but none have produced satisfactory results.

Based on research results, there are three main characteristics of asymmetric threats arising from this conflict: first, the asymmetry of power and access, where companies have substantial capital, access to lawyers and legal institutions, and support from security forces, while indigenous communities have limited legal knowledge and weak economic capacity, creating a strong sense of injustice in the public eye. Next is information asymmetry, where the community doesn't fully understand the details of the licensing process and regulations, while companies often don't grasp the meaning and function of ulayat land for the cultural and social life of the Simalungun people. This also has wide-ranging threats because the conflict not only disrupts relationships between parties but also lowers the community's economic productivity, damages the investment image in the Lake Toba area, and could trigger ongoing conflicts that disturb national security stability.

The Role of Habonaron Do Bona Cultural Values in Conflict Resolution

The philosophy of Habonaron Do Bona, which means "truth is the foundation of everything," is at the heart of the value system of the Simalungun community. In resolving disputes, this value is interpreted into two main principles: the principle of musyawarah marhutil, where every disagreement should be settled by sitting together, listening to each other, and finding a fair middle ground for everyone, rather than relying solely on power or force; and the principle of two sides of the truth, which recognizes that both the traditional community and company parties have their own basis of truth that needs to be reconciled, not erased. Applying this approach has proven to significantly reduce tension in several meetings that have been held, as it gives everyone involved in the conflict a feeling of being respected and heard.

Integrated Universal Defense Strategy

Based on field findings, an appropriate comprehensive defense strategy is designed in three interconnected stages: first, the prevention and early detection stage by changing the role of security forces from oppressors to companions, establishing regular communication channels between parties, and involving traditional leaders in every policy related to indigenous community areas; second, the dispute resolution stage by forming a mediation team consisting of government representatives, traditional leaders, legal experts, and conflicting parties, conducting participatory boundary verification, and formulating joint land management agreements; and third, the recovery and development stage by building economic partnerships between companies and communities, facilitating market access for local products, and improving community welfare to create strong regional resilience. A deep discussion shows that this strategy aligns with the true concept of universal defense: defense isn't just about protecting the borders from outside attacks, but also about maintaining justice and welfare at home so that no threats arise from within.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Based on the analysis and discussion, it can be concluded that the land dispute between the indigenous communities and PT Toba Pulp Lestari is a real form of non-military asymmetric threat caused by economic and legal power imbalances, gaps in information access, and overlapping land rights regulations. A cultural approach based on the values of Habonaron Do Bona combined with a persuasive approach has proven to be much more effective in easing conflicts and building agreements compared to the repressive approach that has been used so far. Additionally, a comprehensive defense strategy that involves all components of society, government, and businesses becomes the most appropriate framework to tackle asymmetric threats and create sustainable regional resilience..

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions above, the following are recommended: for the development of science, further research should be conducted to test the application of the universe defense model based on local wisdom in different types of conflicts and regions in Indonesia; for government policy, there should be an immediate reorganization of licensing and the determination of forest and land boundaries involving full participation of indigenous communities transparently; for security forces, they need to integrate understanding of local culture and a persuasive approach into territorial training curricula as well as security operations in conflict-prone areas; and for business actors, they should apply principles of equal partnership and social responsibility in line with the local community's cultural values in all operational activities.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study still has limitations, so further research on Universal Defense Strategy in Tackling Asymmetric Threats Through Cultural and Persuasive Approaches in Conflict-Prone Areas is needed to refine this study and enhance the insights of readers and the authors

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