



Enhancing cross-border tourism between Indonesia and timor-leste: Indonesia's tourism diplomacy

Christy Damayanti, Qonitah Rahmadiena

Faculty of Social and Political Science, Universitas Slamet Riyadi, Surakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

This study explores Indonesia's tourism diplomacy in fostering the development of the tourism sector in the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border region, and how tourism initiatives are integrated within the broader framework of bilateral relations. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, the research draws upon theories of tourism and border diplomacy. The findings reveal that Indonesia's tourism diplomacy extends beyond destination promotion to serve as a strategic instrument in strengthening bilateral relations, enhancing cultural understanding, and reinforcing political stability in the border areas. Border diplomacy, with its emphasis on political security, complements these efforts by ensuring the long-term viability of tourism in the region. The study concludes that the advancement of border tourism in the Indonesia–Timor-Leste context is inseparable from a comprehensive border diplomacy approach that integrates economic, socio-cultural, and political dimensions. This synergy between tourism policy and diplomatic engagement contributes to mutual stability and shared prosperity.

Keywords: Cross-border tourism, tourism diplomacy, border diplomacy, Indonesia–timor-leste relations

Introduction

The political relationship between Indonesia and Timor-Leste has undergone significant transformation since Timor-Leste's independence in 2002. This transformation includes the resolution of border issues through initiatives such as the Joint Border Committee, which has established a stable framework for cross-border cooperation. The bilateral dynamics are further influenced by Timor-Leste's strategic position as a gateway between Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and its aspirations to become a full member of ASEAN. These aspirations reflect the country's broader efforts to expand its regional influence and partnerships. On the other hand, Indonesia plays a crucial role in supporting Timor-Leste's ASEAN integration, presenting a model of reconciliation that is internationally recognized as a benchmark for post-conflict regional governance (Soares, 2024; Galateya, 2023) ^[5, 6]. The Indonesia–Timor-Leste border region has long faced challenges, particularly in terms of limited infrastructure and complex cross-border bureaucracy. Nevertheless, the area holds considerable potential to facilitate cultural and economic exchange. Culturally driven tourism is acknowledged as a means to foster deeper social interaction between the two societies, promote the preservation of local traditions, and enhance the standard of living through new economic opportunities (Rahmawati, 2020; Lahamendu, 2023) ^[8].

In the context of tourism diplomacy, the promotion of local culture—such as through cross-border festivals—can serve as an effective instrument for strengthening bilateral cooperation. These initiatives not only deepen political ties but also open up economic prospects for border communities. Tourism diplomacy contributes to trust-building through cultural interaction and exchanges in arts and traditions. A study by Ye Xu (2022) ^[11] concluded that festivals in destinations with cultural similarities to tourists' own cultures help increase their appreciation of the

destination, positively influence bilateral relations, and enhance the international image of both countries. The sustainability of such programs depends on political stability and the commitment of both governments to develop supporting infrastructure that ensures broader community engagement.

Border regions such as Atambua and Motaain offer high tourism potential. Improving accessibility through the development of transportation infrastructure can open up greater opportunities for international tourism and increase social interaction among local communities. Border tourism plays a vital role in facilitating cultural and economic exchanges that strengthen bilateral relations. Tourism diplomacy thus serves as a strategic tool to promote regional stability and partnership. Through tourism diplomacy, cultural preservation and improvements in local livelihoods can be achieved via increased local economic activity. Cross-border tourism emerges as a strategic instrument of diplomacy. These activities not only reinforce diplomatic ties but also contribute to local economic development. Studies show that political stability and supporting infrastructure are critical for the long-term success of such initiatives (Suwardi & Oktaviani, 2021).

Despite its growing relevance, there is still limited scholarly exploration of the significance of cross-border tourism development from the perspective of diplomacy as an instrument of Indonesia's foreign policy. While diplomacy is recognized as a key element in fostering bilateral relations, its application in the context of border tourism remains underexplored. This study investigates Indonesia's tourism diplomacy in promoting tourism along the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border, positioning it as an integral element in strengthening bilateral ties. The research underscores the need for further study into the effectiveness of tourism diplomacy in shaping more inclusive and productive cross-border relations.

Literature Review

1. Tourism Diplomacy as an Instrument of Soft Power

Tourism diplomacy represents a component of soft power, relying on cultural and economic appeal to foster mutually beneficial international relations without coercive means. Joseph Nye (2004), in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, emphasizes that soft power operates through cultural attraction, political values, and foreign policy. Tourism diplomacy also encompasses nation branding, where tourism becomes a strategic tool for shaping a country's international image. Furthermore, research by Carbone (2017)^[15] and Parfinenko (2019)^[13] underscores that tourism diplomacy can promote positive peace by facilitating value exchange and fostering social and cultural relationships. Tourists, acting as informal diplomats or non-state actors, carry cross-cultural experiences back to their home societies, thereby expanding the influence of local values and traditions.

Border regions offer distinctive opportunities to implement tourism diplomacy. In areas such as the Indonesia–Timor-Leste frontier, there is significant potential to utilize cultural, historical, and natural tourism as diplomatic tools. Studies by Shuiling (2023) and Kozak (2019)^[17] highlight that cross-border tourism can enhance bilateral cooperation through joint destination promotion and cultural heritage management. Moreover, Ritchie and Crouch (2003)^[9] identify border regions as potential catalysts for cross-national economic cooperation. Such regions can serve as platforms for integrating economic development goals with diplomatic agendas.

However, several challenges hinder tourism diplomacy in border areas, including inadequate infrastructure, security perceptions, and a lack of bilateral coordination. Sugiyarto (2018)^[18] notes that sustainable tourism development in border areas requires investment in infrastructure, particularly transport accessibility and accommodation facilities. Additionally, cross-border cooperation is essential to construct compelling security narratives that can attract international tourists. Notably, significant opportunities lie in the use of digital technologies. Ari Kurnia (2021)^[12] emphasizes the importance of digital marketing to promote lesser-known destinations. In border regions, this approach can be leveraged to attract global tourists, strengthen cultural dialogue, and increase local revenue. Tourism diplomacy aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 8 (inclusive economic growth) and Goal 16 (peace and justice). Integrating tourism with the SDGs is not only economically relevant but also socially imperative, as it contributes to enhancing the quality of inter-state relations through intercultural dialogue promotion.

2. Border Diplomacy as a Foundation for Cross-Border Tourism

Border diplomacy supports tourism diplomacy by facilitating the creation of cross-border tourism zones that integrate cultural, historical, and ecological assets from both countries. Border areas have unique appeal as they merge diverse cultural identities. Cross-border tourism destinations can serve as platforms for strengthening bilateral cooperation through cultural exchanges, historical education, and tourism-based economic development. Prokkola (2023) argues that tourism-oriented border

diplomacy can address sensitive issues related to national identity by emphasizing shared narratives such as peace, reconciliation, and economic cooperation.

This approach is particularly relevant in the Indonesia–Timor-Leste context, where the complex history between the two nations can be transformed into educational tourism attractions through constructive storytelling. From a constructivist perspective, borders are not merely physical entities but socially constructed spaces that can be reshaped through diplomacy. Tourism diplomacy can generate new perceptions of borders as peaceful spaces of interaction. The constructivist view also holds that social identities in border regions are dynamic. Tourism diplomacy allows countries to highlight inclusive and collaborative aspects of identity. Thus, tourism diplomacy not only serves economic functions but also plays a critical role in shaping more positive social perceptions of border areas (Prokkola, 2023). As a soft power instrument, tourism diplomacy offers the opportunity to construct new narratives that emphasize borders not as zones of conflict, but as spaces of peaceful interaction. For example, promoting cross-border destinations that highlight cultural and historical similarities can alter both local and international perceptions of borders. Timothy, as cited in Elyta (2023)^[14], points out that tourism can mobilize narratives of collaboration by showcasing the cultural uniqueness of border areas as key attractions and creating spaces for positive interactions.

In the Indonesia–Timor-Leste context, the countries' complex historical narratives can be reframed through constructivist tourism diplomacy. Tourism can serve as a platform to craft new narratives centered on peace and reconciliation. For instance, developing historical tourism based on themes of “reconciliation” and “friendship,” such as cross-border museums or peace monuments, may foster a more positive cross-border identity and strengthen bilateral relations in the long run. This approach offers a strategic lens through which tourism diplomacy can reshape border perceptions. By promoting narratives of peaceful interaction, cultural collaboration, and shared identity, border regions can be transformed into zones of cooperation and tourism appeal that support regional stability and economic growth.

Research Methodology

1. Research Approach

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at understanding the dynamics of border diplomacy and the implementation of tourism diplomacy in the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border region. The qualitative method allows for an in-depth analysis of policy documents and other written sources to interpret the strategic role of tourism in cross-border diplomatic relations.

2. Data Sources

Primary Data

The primary data consist of official documents issued by the governments of Indonesia and Timor-Leste concerning border diplomacy. These include bilateral agreements, memoranda of understanding, cross-border cooperation strategies, and formal reports issued by national institutions and international organizations involved in border-related initiatives.

Secondary Data

Secondary data include peer-reviewed journal articles related to border and tourism diplomacy, books and reports featuring relevant case studies from other border regions around the world, and statistical data on tourism activity in the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border area obtained from Indonesia’s Central Bureau of Statistics (Badan Pusat Statistik – BPS).

3. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted through document analysis, with emphasis on policy frameworks, cooperative agreements, and media coverage of bilateral tourism events. This approach enables the identification of institutional narratives and strategies that underpin tourism diplomacy in the border context.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

The collected documents were analyzed using content analysis to identify key themes, patterns, and concepts related to border diplomacy and cross-border tourism development. This analysis focuses on how tourism diplomacy is operationalized through bilateral cooperation mechanisms and how it contributes to regional stability, economic integration, and socio-cultural exchange. Indonesia’s Tourism Diplomacy in Border Regions. Indonesia has strategically utilized tourism as a diplomatic tool to strengthen relations with neighboring countries, including Timor-Leste. The use of tourism diplomacy has gained relevance due to the shared land borders and the significant tourism potential of the Indonesia–Timor-Leste frontier. In recent years, Indonesia’s Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (Kemenparekraf) has launched various initiatives emphasizing tourism as a medium for advancing bilateral ties with Timor-Leste.

On February 13, 2023, the governments of Indonesia and Timor-Leste signed five memoranda of understanding during a bilateral meeting between Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Timor-Leste Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak at the Bogor Presidential Palace, West Java. These MoUs covered

1. Higher education cooperation
2. Human resource development and knowledge exchange
3. Industrial technical cooperation
4. Meteorology, climatology, and geophysics cooperation
5. Economic cooperation in border regions (Setkab, 2023)

The fifth MoU reflects both nations’ shared understanding of the importance of inclusive collaboration in border areas, including the development of cross-border tourism to promote local prosperity and economic integration. In April 2022, both countries discussed a preliminary MoU focused specifically on border tourism development, covering joint promotions, destination development, and capacity building for tourism professionals. Timor-Leste also expressed hopes that Indonesia would offer visa-on-arrival access, particularly to Bali and East Nusa Tenggara, for Timorese tourists (Kemenparekraf, 2022). A major initiative under Indonesia’s tourism diplomacy is the development of border areas into leading tourist destinations. These efforts highlight not only natural beauty but also the cultural diversity shared by both countries. Cultural festivals co-organized by Indonesia and Timor-Leste in the border region serve to showcase each country’s heritage while also

attracting tourists. Such festivals typically feature traditional dance, music, and cuisine, illustrating the rich and interconnected cultures of the two nations.

Prominent examples include

- Wonderful Indonesia Cross-Border Festival held at Motaain Border Post (PLBN), Belu Regency
- Fulan Fehan Festival, celebrating intertribal and cross-border friendship in East Nusa Tenggara

Timor-Leste also invited the government of Kupang to participate in the 2024 Fronteira Festival and has partnered with Widya Mandira University in Kupang for academic and cultural exchange activities. These events aim to strengthen cultural ties across the border, reflecting shared traditions and values despite administrative separation.

Cross-Border Tourism Collaboration and Community Engagement

Indonesia has also developed a cross-border tourism program that fosters collaboration between Indonesian and Timorese communities to create mutually beneficial tourism experiences. The initiative emphasizes intercommunity connectivity and local involvement in the planning and management of tourist destinations rooted in natural and cultural resources. A successful example is the development of eco-tourism leveraging coastal areas, tropical forests, and shared historical sites in the border zone. Kemenparekraf, in cooperation with Timor-Leste’s government, has established tourism information centers at key border locations. These centers provide visitors with comprehensive information on tourist destinations, travel regulations, and cultural norms. Beyond their promotional function, they also raise awareness about environmental protection and cultural preservation. In previous joint festivals, Indonesia has sent delegations of up to 300 people to promote border culture and tourism.

Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation

In the field of infrastructure development, both countries have made significant efforts to improve cross-border connectivity. One notable initiative is the improvement of transportation links between border regions. In 2022, both countries agreed to enhance land transportation infrastructure, including the construction and upgrading of roads connecting major border towns such as Atambua (Indonesia) and Oecusse (Timor-Leste). These improvements aim to facilitate the movement of tourists and goods, promote business opportunities, and increase cross-border tourism flow.

Additionally, Indonesia and Timor-Leste have agreed to establish shared infrastructure in the border area to support tourism, including hotels, restaurants, and service facilities built to international standards. These facilities are intended to attract both domestic and international visitors and transform the border zone into a sustainable tourism corridor.

Festival Diplomacy and International Support

A flagship program of Indonesia’s tourism diplomacy is the Border Cultural Festival, which has been held annually since 2021. This festival involves active participation from local communities in both countries and promotes destinations that reflect the natural and cultural

characteristics of the border area. The program has received support from international organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), which has provided training for tourism professionals working in the border region.

Indonesia–Timor-Leste Border Diplomacy: Political and Security Context

Border diplomacy between Indonesia and Timor-Leste serves as a vital mechanism for maintaining political stability and security in a sensitive geopolitical environment. Since Timor-Leste gained independence in 2002, Indonesia has been directly engaged in managing various issues related to the border, with particular emphasis on the resolution of territorial boundaries and the regulation of cross-border movement of people and goods. As part of Indonesia's foreign policy, border diplomacy aims to foster harmony and stability in bilateral relations, especially considering the potential for tensions in the frontier areas.

According to Setiawan (2023), a notable achievement of border diplomacy is the 2013 Land Border Settlement Agreement, which provides a clear legal framework for the territorial demarcation between Indonesia and Timor-Leste. This agreement significantly reduced the potential for territorial disputes and reinforced the foundation for a secure and cooperative border region. The *International Relations Journal of the University of Indonesia* further highlights the role of diplomacy in peacefully resolving border conflicts as a critical step toward regional peace (Center for Diplomacy and Security Studies, 2022).

In terms of practical border management, the two countries engage in joint security patrols to monitor cross-border activity. This collaboration not only involves physical surveillance but also the joint response to security threats such as illegal trade, drug trafficking, and the movement of armed or terrorist groups that could undermine regional stability (Setiawan, 2023). The intersection of political security and economic cooperation in the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border area reflects an integrated approach to diplomacy. While security remains a central concern, Indonesia's border diplomacy is also oriented toward fostering shared economic development. This includes the utilization of natural resources in the border region and the expansion of mutually beneficial economic partnerships. In this context, tourism becomes an important element of a broader strategy to achieve shared prosperity, which in turn contributes to enhanced national security.

Border diplomacy has had a measurable impact on the growth of cross-border tourism. According to Indonesia's Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS, 2023), there has been a notable increase in tourist arrivals across the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border, driven by both leisure and business purposes. This rise in cross-border movement reflects the effectiveness of tourism diplomacy in enhancing bilateral engagement and capitalizing on the tourism potential of the frontier. Indonesia's political strategy to safeguard the eastern region particularly in relation to Timor-Leste is closely tied to its national interest in preventing instability that could threaten domestic political equilibrium. Border diplomacy, therefore, is not only about managing existing security concerns but also about strengthening bilateral relations to avoid future conflicts and maintain a stable regional order. As noted in the *Journal of International Security* (Setiawan, 2023), Indonesia has a vested interest in

ensuring the political stability of Timor-Leste as part of its broader strategy to secure its eastern territories from external threats. This has led to a proactive foreign policy stance that encompasses security cooperation, political support, and economic assistance to Timor-Leste.

Border Control and the Prevention of Security Threats

One of the key priorities of border diplomacy is the enhancement of border control mechanisms to prevent activities that could jeopardize bilateral stability. This includes monitoring for smuggling, illegal migration, and the infiltration of extremist or armed groups seeking to exploit weak border enforcement. To counter these risks, Indonesia and Timor-Leste have committed to strengthening surveillance systems and deepening cross-border security collaboration. Such efforts aim to preserve peace and prevent the escalation of violence or unrest in the borderlands (Center for Diplomacy and Security Studies, 2022).

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study highlights the strategic role of Indonesia's border diplomacy with Timor-Leste in promoting political stability and security within the border region. Such diplomatic efforts have had a direct impact on the development of the tourism sector along the Indonesia–Timor-Leste frontier. Through effective border diplomacy, Indonesia has successfully strengthened bilateral relations, fostered mutually beneficial cooperation, and managed critical issues related to territorial boundaries, natural resource governance, and joint security.

Indonesia's border diplomacy contributes significantly to tourism diplomacy, which serves not only to promote destinations but also to deepen bilateral ties. These efforts include the development of border regions into tourism zones that showcase natural beauty and cultural diversity, as well as shared heritage between the two countries. Initiatives such as joint cultural festivals and cross-border tourism programs, which actively involve local communities, have proven effective in reinforcing regional stability—an essential foundation for sustainable tourism development.

Overall, the growth and advancement of tourism in the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border region cannot be separated from the broader context of integrated border diplomacy, which encompasses economic, social, political, and security dimensions. Indonesia's border diplomacy has yielded tangible benefits not only in strengthening bilateral relations but also in opening inclusive economic opportunities through sustainable tourism, thereby increasing cultural and social interaction among communities on both sides of the border.

Policy Recommendations

To further maximize the role of tourism diplomacy as part of a comprehensive border strategy, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen integrated border diplomacy by expanding cooperation frameworks between Indonesia and Timor-Leste, particularly in areas related to natural resource management, border security, and the development of border zones as sustainable tourism destinations.
2. Promote cross-border tourism corridors that support local economies, foster social cohesion, and enhance

- cultural exchange through structured programs and events involving both governments and communities.
3. Invest in border infrastructure and digital promotion, including transportation access, accommodation facilities, and information systems that support tourism development and improve visitor experience.
 4. Encourage institutional and academic partnerships, such as university collaborations and joint research on border tourism, to generate new knowledge and build capacity among tourism stakeholders.
 5. Ensure inclusive community participation in the planning and implementation of tourism initiatives, particularly among indigenous and border populations, to promote ownership, cultural pride, and long-term sustainability.

By integrating tourism diplomacy within the broader framework of Indonesia's foreign policy and regional cooperation, the Indonesia-Timor-Leste border can evolve from a site of geopolitical sensitivity into a model of peace, collaboration, and shared prosperity.

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