

# Indonesia's Strategic Narrative on the New Dynamics of Great Power Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

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## Abstract

Given the rising political tensions between the two great powers, the United States (U.S.) and the People's Republic of China (PRC), a geopolitical shift to the Indo-Pacific region is critical moment in the 21st century. Ideological, economic, military and technological aspects of this new struggle appear to be sharpening. In the current geopolitical change in the Indo-Pacific, two concerns that have not received much attention are addressed in the research, namely the importance of strategic narrative competition in the global information era and the part played by Indonesia in terms of its strategic narratives as a nation in the center of Indo-Pacific geopolitics. By focusing on the interaction of each actor in projecting a story about the order in the new world system, encouraging actors to adapt to their identities and roles in the story, and enacting policies that are in line with their interests, strategic narrative studies have the potential to explore geopolitical issues more thoroughly. Indonesia positions itself actively in a strategic narrative construction that can compete, and create a strategic role that can be played in accordance with its interests rather than playing a passive role and only becoming a victim in the face of the strategic narrative contestation among the great powers. The strategic narrative of Indonesia as it relates to identity, policy, and system is specifically examined in the research. It also examines the role that Indonesia plays in the formulation and projection of the narratives, as well as how the narratives are received in the context of the emerging Indo-Pacific's geopolitical struggle. As a middle power, Indonesia offers a shared strategic narrative that promotes a goal of greater cooperation, hence reducing great power rivalry.

**Keywords:** foreign policy, Global Maritime Fulcrum, Indonesia, Indo-Pacific, strategic narrative

## Introduction

The research elaborates on Indonesia's strategic narrative in the context of a new geopolitical shift to the Indo-Pacific, which is being brought on by escalating political tensions mainly between the two great powers, the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Clearly, the ideological, military, economic, and technological components of this new struggle are starting to sharpen (Rudd, 2022). There are many different viewpoints on the Indo-Pacific region's strategic importance. Australia was the first nation to embrace this viewpoint in its 2013 Defence White Paper and has consistently shown strategic interest in the region ever since (Australian Department of Defence, 2013; Medcalf, 2018). Now more and more official documents of several countries have extensively acknowledged the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region and adopt what so-called Indo-Pacific strategy ("Reinventing the Indo-Pacific", 2023). This includes Japan in 2016, followed by New Zealand, India, ASEAN, and the US, and recently the Republic of Korea. Since France adopted the Indo-Pacific strategy in 2019, additional nations including Germany, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the European Union (EU) have all joined in, making the Indo-Pacific a geopolitical phrase that is being debated outside of the countries that make up the area itself.

The central subject of current strategic narrative is the fight for geopolitical power, with China using the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) to revive the Silk Road and build massive infrastructure projects to link Eurasia and the Pacific (Brands & Gaddis, 2021). In response, the U.S., along with Japan, Australia, and India, implemented the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (The Quad). Additionally, most recently, the U.S. has stepped up its efforts to advance its interests in the Indo-Pacific by forging AUKUS, a new alliance with Australia and the UK, to boost military-industrial collaboration and provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines (The White House, 2021b).

The US narrative in its 2022 National Security Strategy, which claims that China is the major adversary with the capacity and ambition to overthrow the current order, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, also highlights the conflict's escalating nature (The White House, 2022a). The National Security Strategy of Japan, released in December 2022, shows a substantial shift in the narrative as Japan emphasizes nearly tripling its defense and boosting its counterstrike capabilities (MoFA of Japan, 2022). China, on the other side, established a narrative that exacerbated deeper disputes, particularly in reaction to Taiwan. At China's 20th Party Congress, Xi Jinping emphasized that China's unification is critical to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (MoFA of PRC, 2022).

Indonesia cannot avoid the impact of the increasingly escalating competition, although mitigating the direction of the conflict is possible by taking a role in the strategic narrative from a unique perspective. In this instance, Indonesia positions itself actively in a strategic narrative that can compete and create a strategic role that can be played in accordance with its interests rather than playing a passive role and only becoming a victim in the face of the strategic narrative contestation among the great powers. The research focuses on Indonesia's strategic narrative within the framework of the free-active foreign policy, the Global Maritime

Fulcrum (GMF), and its proficiency in playing hedging strategies, which is again relevant in enhancing its strategic role in dealing with the dynamics of new geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific. It is obvious that the free and active foreign policy, which was developed as a direct response during the Cold War, has once again found its place in this new environment of competition. The adoption of ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019 and the document's ongoing strategic importance highlight Indonesia's activities and aspirations in the region (Ministry of Communications and Informatics of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023).

In this strategic conception of the importance of Indo-Pacific, the research seeks to discuss two captivating underexplored issues that hold immense relevance in today's dynamic global landscape. Firstly, it is to explain the importance of strategic narrative competition, a phenomenon that is becoming more well-known in the digital age. Understanding the forces that shape international relations requires a thorough understanding of how states construct and use their narratives in this intensely competitive environment. Secondly, the vital importance of Indonesia as a significant player in the dynamic Indo-Pacific geopolitics will be revealed in the second analysis of Indonesia's strategic narrative. In one of the most crucial geographic regions in the globe, the strategic narrative of Indonesia has the capacity to significantly modify perceptions, influence choices, change alliances, and shape the course of international affairs.

This narrative that Indonesia plays in the Indo-Pacific differs from the narrative of structural realism perspective that the conflict between the ruling power and the rising power has the potential to occur. Especially when referring to the historical pattern since the time of Sparta and Athens in ancient Greece. Allison (2015) states that the condition he calls the Thucydides' Trap has occurred at least 16 times in recorded history, and 12 of them ended by war (Allison, 2015). In this view, the new power will seek to revise the old-world order, while the new power will maintain the system that it created. The same applies to the competition between the US and China in the struggle for supremacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Allison & Blackwill, 2013; Friedberg, 2011).

To actively mainstream the global order in line with Indonesia's interests and aspirations, and participate in the contested geopolitical narrative, it is crucial to examine the strategic narrative that Indonesia used to deal with competition in the Indo-Pacific. It is critical for a variety of reasons, including identifying the following: the main motives and priorities of Indonesia's foreign policy; the process of policy formulation and implementation; the engagement and presentation of Indonesia's prestige, influence, and diplomatic initiatives in global affairs; the management of perception and communication in dealing with the international community; and the consistency and coherence of Indonesia's foreign policy in assessing the reliability and credibility of Indonesia as a global player.

The study of strategic narratives is a useful approach for examining the function of stories generated by Indonesia to characterize their foreign policy aims and actions in international relations. On the world stage, these narratives are utilized to portray Indonesia's unique identity, interests, values, priorities, and ambitions (Wicaksana & Karim, 2022). Highlighting the significance of strategic narrative as an approach does not imply that

material interests and capabilities in the Indo-Pacific as neglectable. However, none of the material pursuits undertaken by regional players are contradict the narratives established in this research. Thus, strategic narrative gives more nuance to the contest of power in the region.

The research questions are: 1) How significant is Indonesia's role under the Indo-Pacific geopolitical rivalry? 2) How Indonesia's strategic narrative on Indo-Pacific is formulated, projected, and perceived? 3) What is Indonesia's strategic narrative in each level of analysis: system narrative, policy narratives, and identity narrative?

## Literature Review

Many experts are engaged in a lively debate on geopolitical rivalry between major powers. This competition has various facets, including economics, politics, military, and technology, but one of the most essential aspects of the Indo-Pacific contestation is the contestation of strategic narratives (Byrne, 2020). The phrase Indo-Pacific refers to a state reaction to dynamic trends in both international politics and economics, as well as the building of political players in a region as a theatrical unit for strategic purposes (Brewster & Farnham, 2020). Through their book, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2014) pioneered the concept of strategic narratives in the study of international relations. The concept of strategic narrative is defined as "...a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors". As a result, strategic narrative becomes an essential part to study of international relations, where the states establish and maintain its influence both domestically to acquire legitimacy and support from the people, and also fights for national goals and ambitions when interacting with other countries (Miskimmon et al., 2014).

The Indo-Pacific concept is part of the contestation of many nations' interests, particularly in dealing with China's actions, which is seen as increasingly assertive following the election of Xi Jinping in 2012. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) idea which originated in Japan and was later included into Donald Trump's grand US strategy to safeguard US interests in the area. Thus, the Indo-Pacific concept appears to be associated with competition resulting from China's aspirations as regional and global power. In the context of Indo-Pacific, the study of strategic narratives mainly assumes that the regional block as a contested concept or "a mental map" that guide countries to advance their strategic interests (Medcalf, 2020). Each narratives have potential and strategic implication to the regional dynamic. While most of the study strategic narratives are dominated by the great power competition, the research aims to highlight the importance of middle power in the constructing regional conception (Barthwal-Datta & Chacko, 2020).

Indonesia has its own vision of its place in the strategically important Indo-Pacific region. Since Marty Natalegawa's address at the Centre for Strategic and International Strategies (CSIS) in Washington DC in May 2013, the phrase "Indo-Pacific" has been used in Indonesian foreign policy discourse. The term also part of the president Jokowi's Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) strategy. In his vision the Indo Pacific is described as a "a new

regional concentric circle". Recently the Indo-Pacific concept has also become common in government documents until the adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) at the regional level (Scott, 2019).

Indonesia's growing importance in the new geopolitical order in the Indo-Pacific is very reflected in some studies with several concerns. Firstly, geographically Indonesia is a maritime power located in a strategic area because it is the only country that directly borders the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean (Shekhar, 2018), and also, the role of the South China Sea which is very strategic for China to instil its influence as a global power, as well as the role of the Caribbean Sea for the United States in the early 20th century (Kaplan, 2015).

Secondly, the role of leadership in ASEAN is very important where Indonesia has issued an initiative to produce a joint attitude among ASEAN countries and maintain its centrality through the AOIP (Anwar, 2020). Thirdly, Indonesia uses free and active foreign policy to carry out a hedging strategy, by trying to take advantage of the competition between the two parties (Mubah, 2020). Southeast Asia countries including Indonesia is no stranger to implementing hedging strategies through neutralism and non-alignment in the face of past great power competition. The aim of this strategy is to avoid being too close and too dependent on a single external force (Shambaugh, 2020).

However, none of previous research explore Indonesia's strategic narrative in the new geopolitical order in the Indo-Pacific. The research, for those reasons will focus on the role of strategic narrative under the doctrine of free-active politics in a new context. The research aims to analyse the significance of Indonesia's global political position in expanding its influence, managing expectations, and changing the discursive context in which Indonesia presents its interests. Focusing on Indonesia's critical role in constructing a shared strategic narrative in a region at the epicentre of Indo-Pacific tectonic rivalry will provide an opportunity to delve deeper into geopolitical issues by reaching the realm of interaction of Indonesia in projecting a story about the order in the new world system, encouraging it to adjust to their identities and roles in the story, and implementing policies that are in accordance with its interests (Miskimmon et al., 2014).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The significance of strategic narratives conception in foreign policy, diplomacy, and international relations is a direct response to the rise of modern information technology and hence the information society. In addition to retaining the function of rivalry in material power, political players in global politics employ communication as an essential field to play. Lawrence Friedman introduced the notion of strategic narrative in international relations in 2006 particularly in the situations of war, and it has subsequently been extensively used in research on larger topics (Miskimmon et al., 2017). Strategic narratives—a term that is now used more broadly—are essential tools that governments and other actors may employ to increase their power, control expectations, and modify the discursive environment in which they operate (Miskimmon et al., 2014).

In relations to regional order in the Indo-Pacific, nations construct strategic narratives about regional order in an effort to influence how others see them and the standards that are put on their behaviour. Regional order narratives provide normative representations that are particular to a certain geographic area and outline the ideal behaviours and responsibilities that states should embrace. They describe how states should interact with one another, the predicted power relations, and the social repercussions of these interactions (Barthwal-Datta & Chacko, 2020).

In developing and analysing strategic narratives in international relations, Miskimmon et. al. (2014) divides the analysis into three levels: 1) System Narrative, 2) Identity Narrative, and 3) Policy Narrative (Figure 1). Each section plays an important role in analysing foreign policy and understanding interactions in international relations. System Narrative refers to the level of analysis where international political actors conceptualize their understanding of the international system. Meanwhile, in the Identity Narrative type, the analysis is carried out by looking at the values, characteristics, and goals of a country in responding to certain issues. Then the last one relates to Policy Narrative, or also known as Issue Narrative to describe how a policy is taken and adjusted to achieve the desired goal (Miskimmon et al., 2014).

Moreover, this level of strategic narratives is closely linked to the formulation, projection, and reception of strategic narrative, providing a comprehensive framework for analysing state's behaviour and aspiration (Figure 1). At the formation stage, political actors base their narratives in a coherent and consistent manner on national historical and cultural experiences. While at the projection stage, strategic narratives are communicated to a wide audience through communicative activities or actions such as speeches by state leaders, announcements in the mass media, cultural diplomacy and other activities and forms of communication (such as historical interpretation, analogies, metaphors, symbols, etc.) and images that aim to promote national identity and aspirations. The reception stage is an important part because the effectiveness of strategic narratives in influencing is closely related to the interpretation and response of other actors in international relations (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2018).

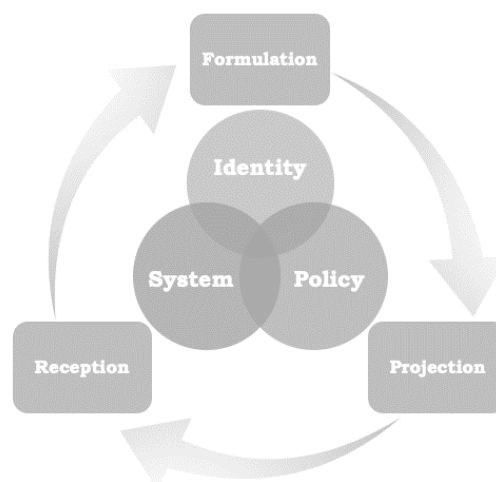


Figure 1 Level of Analysis and Cycle of Strategic Narrative

Source: Modified from Miskimmon et. al. (2018)

At the identity level, Indonesia's strategic narrative focuses on its national identity and how it perceives itself in the international community. This comprises elements that shape political discourse, such as historical experiences, cultural legacies, national beliefs, or even myths in shaping political discourse (Schmitt, 2018). In this article, this level represented by Free-Active Foreign Policy, and Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) as an identity narrative. The policy level involves specific policy goals, strategies, and actions that Indonesia adopts to pursue its national interests. In this case, Indonesia's policy narrative will focus on the adoption of AOIP in 2019 with significant initiative of Indonesia, and its continuous strategic importance in shaping regional order. Indonesia aims to maintain a stable and peaceful regional environment with ASEAN at the centre of regional order, enhance regional cooperation in inclusive manner, and contribute to the development of a rules-based international order.

The system level refers to the broader regional and global context in which Indonesia operates. It considers the existing international norms, power dynamics, and regional institutions. At this level, Indonesia seeks to project its influence and promote its policy preferences within the existing global system as middle power. It reflects how Indonesia aims to position itself strategically in the international arena and address various global, regional, and domestic challenges mainly but not limited to maritime issues.

These three levels of Indonesia's strategic narrative are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The identity level informs the values and principles that guide Indonesia's policy formulation. The system level influences the way Indonesia navigates regional and global dynamics and seeks recognition for its contributions. The policy level reflects how Indonesia's identity and understanding of the global system are translated into concrete policy actions. It must be cohesive in order to have an influence on creating regional order (Van Noort, 2017).

Furthermore, the projection, formulation, and reception of Indonesia's strategic narrative are closely tied to these levels. Formulation refers to the process of developing policies and strategies based on the country's identity and understanding of the system. Projection involves the communication of Indonesia's identity, policy goals, and aspirations to external audiences. Reception relates to how other countries and international actors perceive and acknowledge Indonesia's role, contributions, and policy positions. It involves adoption, accommodation or opposition to the narratives (Wilkins & Kim, 2020). It is important to see these narratives as a cyclical process where reception by international community can be considered as an input for the formulation.

## **Research Method**

The method that will be used in this research is descriptive qualitative with data collection mainly using document studies. Descriptive study defined as an "attempts to describe systematically a situation, problem, phenomenon, service or programme, or provides information about... attitudes towards an issue" (Kumar, 2018). The document study was conducted by compiling official statements from the Presidential Speech, and the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs in response to the Indo-Pacific issue and a number of incidents related to rising tensions between the US and China. This stage is useful for exploring strategic narratives in the formation and projection stages. The research will also explore perspectives from internal parties at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, international relations experts from think-tanks, journalists and/or experts who are concerned about foreign policy and Indo-Pacific issues, as well as from external parties namely from major embassies both from related parties namely the US, China and also Australia to deepen perspectives, especially at the reception stage in Indonesia's strategic narrative. The collected data will then be categorized into three levels of strategic narrative analysis, namely: system narrative to obtain Indonesia's conception of the ideal system and international relations order, then identity narrative conception of the ideal role of Indonesia in the narrative system, and policy narratives by exploring strategic steps has been done to achieve these goals and ideals.

## Analysis

### Identity Narrative: Free-Active Foreign Policy, and Global Maritime Fulcrum

#### *Free-Active Foreign Policy*

To explore the narrative of Indonesian identity in a more systematic way, the research divides the discussion into two main parts, namely: Free-Active foreign policy, and the Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF). Free-active politics is placed in the identity narrative because it emphasizes more as a doctrine, principle, strict standard or worldview than as a more implementable thing such as policy, strategy, or ideology in carrying out foreign policy (Shekhar, 2018).

Historically, free-active politics has served as a strategic narrative for independence and sovereignty, which serves to escape the memory of colonial times and international subordination. The genesis of this strategic narrative - which in turn provided an ideal platform for "free and active foreign policy principle" can be found in the Preamble of the Indonesian Constitution 1945 which says that "independence is the right of all nations and thus colonialism in the world must be abolished". The free-active foreign policy also derived from the preamble that says "participate in maintaining the world order based on freedom, eternal peace and social justice". During the cold war, free-active politics was also a form of Indonesia's strategic perception to the then world order in the midst of the bipolarity of international relations at that time, as well as a response for polarization and political vulnerability in the country.

The principles of Free-Active foreign policy were adopted since 1948 where the Vice-President Hatta president stated his vision a session of the Working Group of the Central National Committee of Indonesia (KNPI), the forerunner of the Indonesian Parliament, which later published under the title *Mendayung Antara Dua Karang* or - roughly translated into - rowing between two rocks. In his statement he argues that "...we must remain the subject



who reserves the right to decide our own destiny and fight for our own goal, which is independence for the whole of Indonesia.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, n.d.). The Hatta’s vision was a doctrine on how Indonesia has to strategically position itself amidst the ideological rivalry at the time. The essence of principle of Free-Active doctrine emphasizes: 1) Free: being independent in making decision based on national interest and not being dictated by foreign power 2) Active: to participate and contribute to international endeavour in maintaining world peace and security. In sum, free-active doctrine is political stance which does not take side of any political block or group, that is non-block. However, free-active is not neutrality. Rather, it is maintaining independence and strategic autonomy in making decision to serve the national interest (Bao, 2023; Sukma, 1995).

In practice, the free-active policy tries to accommodate every foreign policy of each era, as long as it does not abandon its main principle of not entering into alliances and defense pacts with any party. Including the tendency of President Soekarno’s policies that tend to lean towards the radicalization and anti-neo-colonialism sentiment, or the era of President Soeharto’s leadership which was pro-west and overemphasized on economic development (Sukma, 1995). As an identity narrative, free-active foreign policy has succeeded in positioning it in the central role of global leadership of countries in Asia and Africa during the Cold-War era with the notable initiative in Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

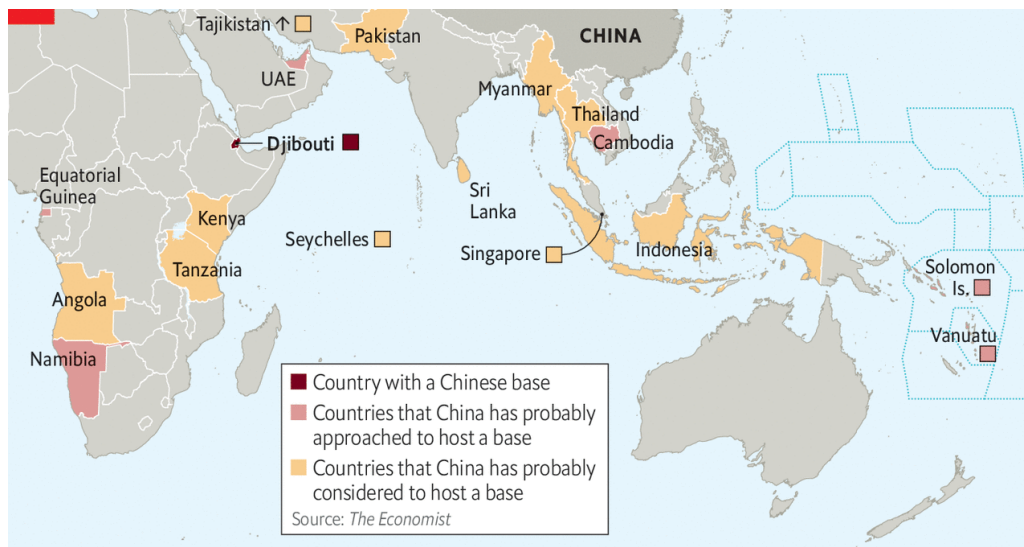


Figure 2 Projection of China’s Military Base

Source: “Reinventing the Indo-Pacific”, 2023

In the context of the current great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, the narrative has again found its relevance. Indonesia tries to create the new non-aligned perspective especially among ASEAN member countries and another middle power in the region. The rising tensions between the United States and China certainly involves a tug of war for influence between the two (Bao, 2023). In this context, Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi, for

example, felt the need to emphasize her position in the rivalry. It was triggered by the circulation of the annual report from the Department of Defense entitled the Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020 which stated that Indonesia was one which is considered a military logistics base by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) (Figure 2). Marsudi in her press conference stated that "I want to emphasize that, in accordance with the lines and principles of Indonesian foreign policy, Indonesian territory cannot and will not be used as a military facility base for any country." (Sutrisno, 2020).

The accusations from the United States in the report are certainly unfounded, considering that Indonesia is a founder and has leadership roots in the Non-Align Movement. This also confirms the view of Kurt Campbell, coordinator of Indo-Pacific affairs at the National Security Council (NSC) that Indonesia is "the countries most important to the United States but least understood." (Bland, 2021).

### *Global Maritime Fulcrum*

Another identity narrative that is also important to Indonesia's view on the Indo-Pacific is President Joko Widodo's (Jokowi) doctrine regarding the Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) which emphasizes Indonesia as an important power in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Agastia & Perwita, 2015). This doctrine became an important policy basis in Jokowi's first period (2014-2019) with several important pillars in it, namely culture, resources, infrastructure, diplomacy, and defense. In his inauguration speech as President on October 20, 2014, Jokowi said "We have far too long turned our back on the seas, the oceans, the straits, and the bays. It's time to restore everything so that "jalesveva jayamahe" (in the sea we will triumph)." (Widodo, 2014). The narrative emphasizes Indonesia's aspirations as an Indo-Pacific power which is geographically an archipelagic country that stretches between two oceans (Medcalf, 2014).

His vision of the GMF was conveyed to world leaders for the first time at the 9<sup>th</sup> East Asian Summit meeting, November 2014. As a narrative identity, Jokowi's doctrine is strong enough to become the basis for focusing on national policies, and at the same time, becoming a neutral point that brings together the interests of the great powers in the world. The GMF dimension construed in three folds: 1) Sovereignty dimension over its territorial waters and its natural resources in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ); 2) The security dimension related its strategic location at the centre of maritime dynamics and contestation of the great power in the region; 3) Related to economic dimension due its natural resources potentials, and strategic location as major international trade route (Djumala, 2015).

The focus on maritime infrastructure, for example, is the right step to implement a hedging strategy against China through the BRI program. Qiu Xinli, spokesperson of the Embassy of the Republic of China in Jakarta states in his article on the Jakarta Post: "It is evident that bilateral cooperation within the BRI and GMF creates no "trap", but only unlimited opportunities" (Xinli, 2019).

At the same time, the United States also sees it as an opportunity to project its Indo-Pacific vision. US Secretary of Defense James Mattis during his visit to Indonesia in 2018 called the doctrine a point of maritime security cooperation, calling it the "maritime fulcrum of the Indo-Pacific area" (Chan, 2018). From the two statements and the agendas of the two countries, in viewing the GMF, it can be seen that Indonesia's maritime narrative is not only useful for emphasizing its geographical position, but also allows Indonesia's hedging strategy, where China places more emphasis on maritime connectivity and economy, while the US emphasizes on maritime security cooperation.

The significant role of GMF as strategic narrative also, make Jakarta able to manage the Indian Ocean. Indonesia hosted the first Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Summit in 2017, and with its initiative the organization produce significant achievements by producing the "Jakarta Declaration and Plan of Action". In 2018, Indonesia also hosted the 5<sup>th</sup> Our Ocean Conference, and the Indonesia-Africa Maritime Dialogue.

Although it has strategic value in the view of the two great powers, both the United States and China, and other middle and small powers in the region, however as an identity narrative, the doctrine did not become much of a foothold in the second period of Jokowi Presidency. In his inauguration speech, President Jokowi did not mention the word maritime. Likewise, in her foreign policy priority speech, Marsudi focused on the policies she called "4+1", namely trade and investment, citizen protection, sovereignty, regional and global leadership, and diplomatic infrastructure (Laksamana, 2019).

Apart from Jokowi's lack of enthusiasm for GMF, the doctrine does have a number of shortcomings in its implementation, especially in the context of competition in the Indo-Pacific. As a doctrine that has a geopolitical dimension, GMF in practice places more emphasis on geoeconomics aspects such as the interest in infrastructure financing and investment in the maritime sectors (Salim & Sundaryani, 2017). Thus, the GMF narrative is more about promoting cooperation rather than conflict and rivalry, as President Jokowi put it in his speech the 13<sup>th</sup> EAS Summit, November 2018: "We need to maintain peaceful and security in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. It is not about struggling for natural resources, regional disputes, and maritime supremacy." (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2018).

### **Policy Narrative: ASEAN Centrality, Inclusivity and Cooperation**

Indonesia's emphasis in the policy narrative in the Indo-Pacific is primarily centred on the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP), in contrast to the identity narrative, which emphasizes domestic assets. Several reasons why the AOIP is part of Indonesia's policy narrative for the Indo-Pacific, among others, first, Indonesia is the initiator of the AOIP, where the big ideas and initial drafts were mostly adopted from proposals made by Indonesian diplomats. Second, Indonesia does not have a specific national strategy or document of cross-sectoral agreement among relevant ministries that discusses the Indo-Pacific. Third, Indonesia's Indo-Pacific concept from the beginning was intended to respond to challenges at the regional level, and put more emphasis on the narrative of inclusiveness and regional cooperation through ASEAN centrality.

Before being officially adopted as an AOIP document by the leaders at the 34th ASEAN Summit in 2019, Indonesia had introduced the need for guidelines and a common perspective for ASEAN to take its stand in the region. Indonesia's perspective on the Indo-Pacific known as "The Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept" was introduced at the 13<sup>th</sup> EAS meeting in Singapore. In his speech at the Plenary Session at the Suntec Convention Centre, Singapore on November 15<sup>th</sup> 2018, President Jokowi used the term Indo-Pacific to refer to the Pacific and Indian Oceans as a "single geostrategic theatre" (Scott, 2019; Tham, 2018).

According President Jokowi, at the meeting, Indonesia and ASEAN countries built the Indo-Pacific concept that emphasized ASEAN Centrality, and hoped that consultations would continue at a joint forum between ASEAN and its partner countries in the EAS. In his view, this concept will benefit all parties by offering several main principles such as "cooperation, – instead of rivalry, inclusiveness, transparency and openness as well as respect for international law." (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2018). He also emphasizes some area of cooperation namely maritime cooperation including maritime security, infrastructure connectivity for economic development, and pushing the agenda of sustainable development.

By ASEAN centrality means that President Jokowi tries to bring the existing mechanism in the regional architecture where ASEAN in its core can build strategic trust and cooperation between its member and the dialogue partners in the region. In the 15<sup>th</sup> EAS Summit 2020, President Jokowi said "As a dialogue forum at the level of state leaders, EAS must continue to be used to build strategic trust to strengthen cooperation. EAS's capital is very large. A total of 5 EAS members currently sits on the UN Security Council, 8 EAS members are members of the G20. EAS also represents more than 54 percent of the world's population and 58 percent of world GDP." (Ministry of State Secretariat, 2020). The ASEAN Centrality emphasized by Indonesia to claim strategic goals: to maintain ASEAN members' unified action against the great power, and to strengthen ASEAN's leadership in the region through mechanisms built into the existing regional architecture, with ASEAN in the centre (Indraswari, 2022).

### **System Narrative: Maintaining Order as a Middle Power**

The conception of Indonesia in the narrative of the system that it wants to build in the Indo-Pacific is very different from the Indo-Pacific strategy imagined by the Quad countries. In the world geopolitical shift where Indonesia is in its tectonic vortex, Indonesia perceives its role as a middle power capable of directing the course of international relations according to its interests. In this case, Indonesia has also participated in constructing the Indo-Pacific which in Rory Medcalf's (2020) terms is a "mental map" that becomes a reference in relations between countries in the region (Medcalf, 2020).

Indonesia's role as a middle power in navigating and constructing the Indo-Pacific system has already emerged in the view of the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) government at the end of his term. among the surrounding Indo-Pacific powers. Indonesia is also the largest archipelagic country which is the most strategic sea route connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Seeing the potential for conflict in the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia offers the Indo-

Pacific Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, a concept that is considered visible if you look at the successful implementation of the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) at the ASEAN level, and the Bali Principles on the Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations agreed at the East Asia Summit in 2011 (Jemadu & Lantang, 2021; Natalegawa, 2013; Tham, 2018).

In this view, Indonesia carries out its role as a middle power which specifically emphasizes positioning as a "regional leader" in ASEAN as well as a "bridge-builder" in mitigating conflicts in the region (Agastia, 2020). In his statement Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa stated "Indo-Pacific requires, therefore, modalities to build mutual trust and confidence. To substitute an all too often vicious cycle of tensions with a virtuous cycle of trust and confidence-building." (Natalegawa, 2013).

Indonesia's role in carrying out its role as a middle power is also stated in the visions and missions of President Jokowi for the first period. The document states "We will enhance the global role through middle-power diplomacy that places Indonesia as a regional power with selective global engagement, giving priority to issues directly related to the interests of the nation and Indonesian people." (Widodo, 2014). Although it is widely perceived that it emphasizes a domestic-oriented and nationalistic foreign policy (Connelly, 2014), the role of middle power strategically remains to be carried out actively in relations international including its foreign policy priority in the UN and the ASEAN (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2015).

The role of middle power carried out by the Indonesian government is very effective in responses to the competitive narrative between China's BRI and QUAD Countries' FOIP. Using the non-align values of the independent foreign policy and the GMF as its identity narrative, Indonesia plays its middle power to gain benefit from the rivalry by emphasizing cooperation in sectors that focus on its own agenda and interest (Pratiwi et al., 2021).

The narrative emphasized by Indonesia about the importance of multilateralism, as well as a rule-based world order is also a rational thing to emphasize. The ASEAN-led mechanism is the anchor of efforts to maintain a stable, safe and prosperous region. Therefore, Indonesia has never been separated from ASEAN as the centre of its foreign policy concentric circle. Indonesia's role will be much more impactful to promote its interests by maintaining the regional architecture that has been built, such as ARF (1994), EAS (2005), and ADMM Plus (2010). Despite the fact that the structures inside the organization created on the basis of the ASEAN framework lack coercive authority, they are nonetheless capable of fostering constructive consultation and debate in order to reduce rivalry and conflict (de Castro, 2022).

### **Narratives Formulation and Projection**

In formulating the Indo-Pacific narrative, Indonesia's view is very dynamic because it is a direct response to the development of the narrative of the great powers, rather than developing it from the outset based on internal needs. The formulation of Indonesia's narrative on the Indo-Pacific is divided into two major stages, namely during the SBY

administration, when Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marty Natalegawa offered the big concept of the Indo-Pacific Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (2013), and during the Jokowi administration through the Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept (Scott, 2019).

The initiative of Natalegawa in 2013 for example, was a response to the Indo-Pacific concept to the escalation that occurred in East Asia and the South China Sea which, according to him, led to a “trust deficit” (Natalegawa, 2013). Some developments that have attracted attention include the development of the Indo-Pacific concept which was brought up by Shinzo Abe before the Indian Parliament in 2007 after the establishment of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Rossiter, 2018). Indonesia’s concerns about the Indo-Pacific are more nuanced as a result of China’s alleged aggression in the South China Sea since 2010, ASEAN leaders’ inability to issue a common communiqué in 2012, and the US’s strategic rebalance in Asia in 2011.

In subsequent developments, the Indo-Pacific concept is not included in the terms commonly used in the Indonesian narrative, especially after the 2014 leadership succession. President Jokowi tries to rediscover the uniqueness of Indonesia's foreign policy through the narrative of Indonesia's rise as a world maritime power, a more bilateral approach, and orientation. policy towards domestic interests, or in Rizal Sukma’s term as his foreign policy advisor as a post-ASEAN foreign policy (Rosyidin & Pattipeilohy, 2020; Sukma, 2009).

The use of the term Indo-Pacific in the Indonesian narrative began to be re-projected in international forums by the Jokowi government after the escalation of the great power conflict in security terminology in the region as a reaction to China’s aggressiveness in early 2017 to 2018. Nevertheless, the contestation of the Indo-Pacific concept began when Japan revived the Indo-Pacific concept in Shinzo Abe’s security policy with the term Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in August 2016 (Rossiter, 2018). Like a tit for tat, Australia, which is also a member of QUAD, also issued a similar statement in November of the same year in the Foreign Policy White Paper. In December, the United States released a National Security Strategy document that identified China as a threat to its interests. The escalation of the great power conflict was also reflected in a statement by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in October 2017, and officially by President Donald Trump himself in November 2017 during his visit to Asia. More aggressively in mid-2018, the US even changed the US Pacific Command to the Indo-Pacific Command (Weatherbee, 2019).

Efforts to draw Indonesia into the vortex of conflict in the Indo Pacific were also seen in the bilateral meeting of the Minister of Defense with the United States Jim Mattis during a visit to Jakarta in January 2018, and also in the bilateral meeting of Retno Marsudi with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi in February. With the premise of Indonesia’s free and active politics, Indonesia aims to strike a balance between the two extremes of world political polarization and presents its own conception that emphasizes inclusivity and collaboration, with ASEAN serving as the anchor (Suryadinata, 2018).

The projection of the Indo-Pacific concept began to be voiced by Marsudi on January 11, 2018 during her speech before the UNGA while campaigning for Indonesia's position for the UNSC seat. “...together with ASEAN, Indonesia will continue to contribute in advancing strong positive cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, instead of a cooperation based on suspicion or

worse, perception of threat.” Marsudi gave a more conceptual presentation of Indonesia's version of the Indo-Pacific view at a meeting of Ministers at the East Asian Summit (EAS) in Singapore in August 2018 (Weatherbee, 2019).

### **Narrative Reception**

The success of Indonesia in pushing the Indo-Pacific idea at the ASEAN level is a crucial step toward developing a unified and coherent narrative among Southeast Asian countries to challenge the interests of major regional players. However, ASEAN nations' acceptance of the AOIP must be viewed as a collective strategic narrative full of compromises among ASEAN countries, and it must, of course, be reacted to by other countries having an interest in these countries, both collectively and individually.

The process of adopting the AOIP itself is quite short for an organization whose decisions are reached by “consultation and consensus”. When dealing with large countries, many concessions must be made among the ten ASEAN countries, which have distinct interests, objectives, and levels of closeness with the great powers. As the result, the concise document covers just broad concepts and accomplishments that can be agreed upon by all parties. However, more work must be expended in describing and developing measurable and specific recommendations. The ASEAN 2023 Chairmanship of Indonesia aims to mainstream this issue by creating the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum, and implementing AOIP in more tangible projects and priority agenda (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023).

Singapore's Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan told parliament, for example, to confirm this. He emphasized the importance of ASEAN Centrality for independence in foreign policy making, but he was realistic enough to say that the AOIP is a “living document” that will continue to be refined and updated. Furthermore, he also mentioned “The Outlook will not stop strategic forces from pulling individual ASEAN Member States in different directions.” (Balakrishnan, 2022).

One of the most visible differences in policy direction in responding to AOIP among ASEAN countries is between Indonesia and Vietnam. Indonesia is more constructive by emphasizing its Indo-Pacific narrative on ASEAN Centrality, while Vietnam has a more realistic view of balance of power by continuing to try to be involved, though not fully involved, in other Indo-Pacific forums outside ASEAN. Differences in seeing China's perceived threat and aggressiveness in the South China Sea are the main factors in Vietnam's attitude to pursuing its own security interests and economic agenda rather than promoting agendas and agreements in the AOIP (Hoang, 2021a).

Despite the different conceptions among ASEAN countries themselves regarding the implementation of the agreement in the AOIP, its acceptance among the Quad countries is generally quite positive. This can be seen from the joint statement which shows support for the importance of ASEAN's centrality. In a joint statement released after the Quad countries meeting in March 2021, for example, it was stated “We commit to work together and with a range of partners. We reaffirm our strong support for ASEAN's unity and centrality and for ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and we underscore our dedication towards working

with ASEAN and its member states—the heart of the Indo-Pacific region—in practical and inclusive ways.” (The White House, 2021a)

However, the statement of the importance of ASEAN centrality by the Quad leaders still needs concrete and substantive work steps. The shift in US leadership from Donald Trump to Joe Biden brings new hope for approaches to regional organizations such as ASEAN. In the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States document released in February 2022 it is stated that “The United States also welcomes a strong and independent ASEAN that leads in Southeast Asia. We endorse ASEAN centrality and support ASEAN in its efforts to deliver sustainable solutions to the region's most pressing challenges.” (The White House, 2022b).

This new approach is also accompanied by investment commitments in priority areas such as strengthening health resilience, maritime-related cooperation, connectivity and improving people-to-people relations. The commitment to ASEAN centrality is also demonstrated by emphasizing the importance of the U.S.-ASEAN Summit, East Asian Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum, and essentially increasing the "diplomatic presence" in the Southeast Asian region (The White House, 2022b). In general, the Biden administration's commitment to ASEAN Centrality can be in several dimensions such as open support for the AOIP, commitment to collective ASEAN meetings, and visits by US officials to ASEAN-related forums such as EAS, ARF, and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) including a visit to Indonesia (The White House, 2022a).

However, the US approach is still too focused on security issues and has not yet addressed economic needs, which are currently still dominated by China with its BRI. The commitment through economic cooperation that many parties have been waiting for at the U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit, namely, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) was launched, although not in too much detail (Li, 2022).

A positive reception was also shown by Australia. Through Will Nankervis, Australian Ambassador to ASEAN on 20 September 2021, said in his official statement “Australia is a strong supporter of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. We are committed to the principles in the Outlook, including ASEAN centrality, openness, transparency, inclusivity, good governance, a rules-based framework and respect for sovereignty and international law.” Regarding the AUKUS collaboration, Australia also stated “This new agreement does not change Australia’s commitment to ASEAN nor our ongoing support for the ASEAN-led regional architecture.” (Nankervis, 2021).

The closeness of the vision on the Indo-Pacific can be seen in India's commitments both bilaterally to Indonesia and commitment to ASEAN centrality. India and Indonesia are intensively committed to finding a common thread between India's Act East Policy and Security and Growth for all in the Region (SAGAR), with the Indonesian Ocean Policy and Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum Vision, while emphasizing the importance of the ASEAN centrality and unity. Moreover, the Indonesian leadership also made an important step in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) with the adoption of the Jakarta Concord and Plan of Action at the IORA Summit, March 2017 (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2018). Regarding AOIP, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi at the 18th India-ASEAN Summit, October 2021 that the AOIP and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) share



relevant fundamental principles in promoting peace and cooperation.” (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2018).

In contrast to the Indo-Pacific conception adopted by Japan, which from the beginning initiated the formation of the FOIP to counter perceptions of China's aggressiveness, ASEAN and the strategic narrative in the conception introduced by Indonesia emphasized the inclusiveness of the Indo-Pacific, where China and other major powers were involved in the formation of a region that safe, stable and prosperous. Therefore, ASEAN's reception of the concept is more considered than the other way around (Choong, 2020). Japan in its official statement supports the adoption of AOIP and supports cooperation and synergy in priority areas (MoFA, 2021).

Different from the fairly good reception among the Quad countries, China has difficulty accepting the strategic narrative of the Indonesian and ASEAN conceptions of the Indo-Pacific. Both Chinese leaders and scholars are reluctant to speak openly about the AOIP concept, this is certainly confusing for ASEAN even though from the beginning it was assured that the Indo-Pacific view it adopted was different from the conception adopted by the Quad countries. The Indo-Pacific view that is inclusive and emphasizes cooperation is not enough to convince China because the term is more widely perceived by the US and its allies to exclude it (Chongkittavorn, 2019; Ho, 2019). It is only recently that positive signals from China have emerged, although not straight forward and explicit, namely with efforts to upgrade relations between ASEAN and China in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in the 24th ASEAN-China summit in October 2021 (Hoang, 2021b). The official statement regarding China's attitude toward AOIP was more explicitly contained in the joint statement issued by ASEAN and China at the Special Summit commemorating the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations on 22 November 2021 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021), and confirmed in the PRC's Position Paper on Supporting ASEAN Centrality in the Evolving Regional Architecture on August 4, 2022 (MoFA of PRC, 2022a). More specifically, China's commitment to the GMF and AOIP discussed in a joint declaration by Indonesia and China during the KTT G20 summit on November 16, 2022 in Bali (MoFA of PRC, 2022b).

## Conclusions

Strategic narrative plays an important role in international relations especially in the Indo-Pacific era. As an ideational construction in geopolitics and geo-economics, where there is no objective reality, the focus of the strategic narrative study helps to clarify the contestation of power, interests, as well as a picture of the ideal relationship and order in relations between countries in the region. Indonesia, which by definition is in the middle between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, has interests and aspirations in facing the challenge of great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific which is reflected in its strategic narrative.

In the competition in constructing the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia presents a narrative of identity as a country that holds Free-Active principles in positioning itself in the competition of great powers, also affirms its geopolitics as GMF. At the policy narrative level, Indonesia

emphasizes the importance of AOIP where ASEAN centrality, and the ASEAN-led mechanism are the policy anchors, and hold the principles of inclusiveness and cooperation to create a stable, safe, and prosperous region. This is in accordance with the EAS agreement where ASEAN member countries have a dialogue with their strategic partners. Then at the level of the narrative system, Indonesia positions itself as a middle power capable of being a bridge for dialogue between countries as well as a leader at the ASEAN regional level. Indonesia also plays the role of middle power for hedging strategies, encouraging rule-based orders, and multilateralism.

Although the formulation seemed less effective at the beginning of Jokowi's leadership, the development of the Indo-Pacific encouraged Indonesia to take a role in developing its own conception in the region. A number of forums have begun to be used as an arena to project Indonesia's views on the Indo-Pacific, especially the EAS since 2018. This move so far reflects the good reception, especially among QUAD countries, but has experienced little resistance from China, which has been antipathy to the Indo-Pacific concept since the beginning. To sum up, Indonesia as middle power plays its role to provide common strategic narrative that potential as an organizing principle that lessen rivalry, and an agenda setter for cooperative behaviours. The kind of narrative that great power fails to provide.

Understanding these narratives allows policymakers and analysts to develop more effective plans and responses to Indonesia's actions and behaviour. It enables a more informed approach to dealing with Indonesia on various topics by providing a broader overview of the country's historical, cultural, and political background. Being fully aware of these narratives, rather than relying on simplistic assumptions, raises the prospect of more constructive and fruitful collaboration, helping to build trust, and foster long-term partnerships.

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