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The Global Maritime Fulcrum as A Strategic Narrative: A Critical Examination of Its Emergence, Conveyance, and Decline in Indonesian Strategic Discourse

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Abstract

In 2014, President Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo declared he would lead Indonesia, the most populous Muslim nation on earth, to become a ‘global maritime fulcrum’ (GMF). His announcement was taken as a sign of Indonesia’s commitment to be a more active participant in regional maritime security. This nascent maritime vision, however, suffers from endogenous flaws, ranging from personal leadership to widespread bureaucratic deficiencies, culminating in its recession from Indonesian political discourse. This paper seeks to understand how and why the GMF receded from political discourse through the lens of strategic narrative. It finds that technocratic appeal serves as a stronger legitimating method of the GMF compared to other forms, which is due to agential preferences aligning with domestic structural conditions, resulting in development narratives being favoured over maritime-related narratives.

Keywords: Indonesia, maritime strategy, Global Maritime Fulcrum, strategic narrative

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Introduction

In 2014, President Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo, delivering his presidential victory speech aboard a traditional wooden *pinisi* boat, declared he would lead Indonesia to become a “...global maritime fulcrum, a global civilisation hub”.² The Global Maritime Fulcrum (hereafter GMF) quickly became a defining feature of Widodo’s technocratic populist style of leadership.³ At the domestic level, the goal of becoming a maritime fulcrum legitimised large spending on infrastructure projects related to maritime connectivity (seaports and roads), maritime economy (fisheries and aquaculture), and maritime tourism.⁴ In its initial stages, the GMF was internationally received as evidence of Indonesia’s commitment to exercising a more active ‘middle power’ role, particularly in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean.⁵

When Widodo began his second term in office in 2019, there were clear signs of his administration pivoting away from pursuing the GMF. The shift was evident in the way the concept became used less often, being pushed back in favour of a development narrative. In contrast to his first inauguration speech in 2014, in which his vision of making Indonesia a maritime fulcrum was accentuated, Widodo’s 2019 speech centred on continuing development and the pursuit of economic growth. The absence of maritime themes suggested the initial prominence of the GMF had faded.⁶

There is a consensus that the GMF, despite being a nascent maritime grand strategy, suffered from endogenous flaws which had resulted in its decline from political discourse. These flaws range from personal leadership – specifically, a lack of experience in conducting foreign policy and preoccupation with handling domestic issues – to

² Tempo 2014

³ Mietzner 2015

⁴ Salim and Negara 2018

⁵ Farhana 2022.

⁶ Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2019

widespread bureaucratic deficiencies in corralling domestic bases of maritime power. As a result of these flaws, the GMF was unable to perform as a grand strategy both domestically and internationally.

Both explanations have limitations. Agential explanations tend to emphasise the role of a singular or small group of political agents in policymaking. In the case of the GMF, the role of Widodo as head of state is often overstated, while existing structural constraints are downplayed.⁷ Although Widodo was instrumental in promoting the GMF, he had to operate within the constraints of the Indonesian political structure wherein compromises must be made.⁸ On the other hand, explanations of bureaucratic deficiencies often overstate the role of constraining factors such as strategic culture and authoritarian legacies, which tend to downplay the role and potential of agents in shaping structure while overemphasising the role of structural influences, especially in discussing failures of the GMF.⁹ However, Widodo has been shown to be able to overcome the constraints of domestic structure through political manoeuvring and shrewd coalition-building to consolidate power and suppress opposition, which has benefitted the implementation of his policy goals.¹⁰

To bridge the gap between these explanations, this study approaches the GMF through the perspective of strategic narrative. A **strategic narrative is defined as “a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors”**.¹¹ A narrative possesses a particular structure which allows narrators to mould together events, characters, and settings into a **coherent plot. It becomes ‘strategic’ when it is deliberately crafted by**

⁷ Agastia 2021; Arif 2021.

⁸ Mietzner 2016; Mietzner 2023.

⁹ Caroline, 2021; Laksmana & Supriyanto, 2018

¹⁰ Mietzner, 2023

¹¹ Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 6

political actors for political purposes, usually by “selecting and highlighting some facets of their history or actions to promote a particular interpretation and evaluation of their character”.¹² The act of selection implies strategic narratives also limit the ways policies may be implemented. In other words, the ideals and goals upon which the strategic narrative is formulated shapes the way policies are implemented.¹³ This provides a more complete understanding of the decline of the GMF in foreign policy discourse. Selection usually rests with key ‘narrators’, such as government executives. Given Widodo’s position as the dominant ‘narrator-in-chief’ within the domestic hierarchy and the absence of meaningful opposition, viewing the GMF through the lens of strategic narrative allows us to understand why some aspects, (in this case, development), are emphasised and legitimised, despite being tangential to the initial ideals espoused in the narrative.

This paper contributes to the discussion by extending the application of the strategic narrative lens in understanding the confluence of agential, domestic, and systemic influences on foreign policy, particularly on the maritime element as an emerging aspect of Indonesian foreign policy.¹⁴ There is a growing body of research examining narratives in Indonesia, but these have mostly been confined to democracy and technocratic and populist national narratives. Grzywacz, for example, explores the absence of narrative coherence in narratives of democracy between politicians at the domestic level and foreign policy elite narratives. Meanwhile, Hatherell and Welsh expound on the uses of technocratic and nationalist narratives in political contestation.¹⁵ These

¹² Ibid, 5.

¹³ See, for example, Van Noort & Colley, 2021.

¹⁴ To be sure, the maritime domain has been featured in foreign policy from the 1960s to the 1990s. However, this domain mostly narrowly focused on recognition of Indonesia’s archipelagic principle in the Law of the Sea Conferences. The adaptation of a more comprehensive maritime-oriented foreign policy is a recent phenomenon. See, among others, Butcher & Elson, 2017; Farhana, 2022

¹⁵ Grzywacz, 2020; Hatherell & Welsh, 2021

studies, however, minimally engage with the emerging maritime aspect which characterised Widodo's first term in office. In what can be considered a first attempt to analyse the GMF from a narrative perspective, Rosyidin analyses the GMF through the lens of national myth which 'provides a strong, driving force behind the birth of novel ideas that have shaped the country's foreign policy'.¹⁶ In doing so, the Widodo administration has successfully woven a narrative based on the myth of the maritime glory of the Srivijaya and Majapahit kingdoms.

One notable merit of the narrative approach is that it balances both agential and structural explanations of grand strategy.¹⁷ The role of political agents as 'narrators' are acknowledged: the formulation of a strategic is inevitably dependent on their personal expertise and beliefs, in addition to other ideational influences on their worldview such as influence from policy advisers. This does not mean the power of agents are unbounded. For their narratives to be accepted, narrators must shape their discourse based on prevailing local and international socio-political contexts. In other words, they must craft messages not only based on their overarching goal, but also the context of their key audiences – the general public, political elites, and foreign leaders – and prevailing systemic conditions.¹⁸ The interaction between narratives and audiences feeds back into the narrator's policy preferences, especially when there is positive reception, thus leading the narrator to continue their promotion of specific policies.

This paper asks two related questions. First, is national myth central to legitimising the GMF? This claim ought to be critically examined. From Rosyidin's perspective, national myth is important in legitimising elite policy through the use of "glorious narratives to gain mass support and remind the people that Indonesia was the most powerful maritime country

¹⁶ Rosyidin, 2021

¹⁷ Hatherell & Welsh, 2021

¹⁸ Cruz, 2000; Freedman, 2015; Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 5; Schmitt, 2018

in South East Asia in the pre-modern era”.¹⁹ This observation stems from Widodo’s heavy use of historical references and symbols, particularly during his first term in office. However, the usage of symbolism receded in the middle and later stages of development of the GMF, which raises questions of the extent of legitimising power of national myth.

This paper argues that technocratic appeal, or the strategy of justifying the GMF through developmental discourses, serves as a stronger and more consistent legitimating factor of GMF, which explains the prevalence of developmental themes within the GMF narrative. Subsequently, if technocratic appeal is indeed the preferred strategy of legitimation, what explains this choice? To answer the second question, both agential preferences and domestic structural conditions need to be examined. This paper argues that although systemic factors, such as the effect of great power politics, do influence strategy to a certain extent, the convergence of agential preferences for development with domestic structural conditions favouring ‘performance politics’ results in political agents preferring technocratic forms of communicative strategy over others for the GMF. Put together, these choices then switch towards developmental themes, resulting in the narrator overemphasising the developmental themes of the GMF, such as maritime economy and infrastructure, while underemphasising other maritime themes, such as maritime culture and security, leading to the perceived decline of the GMF narrative in favour of domestic-oriented economic development.

This paper uses an original dataset of 267 speeches and statements, both in English and Indonesian, delivered by key government officials related to formulating and implementing the GMF from 2014 to 2021, in addition to relevant policy documents. The time frame is deliberately selected to allow a more comprehensive account of the continuity of the GMF strategic narrative. The key government officials include President Joko Widodo as the ‘narrator-in-chief’, alongside other

¹⁹ Rosyidin 2021, 305-306

actors from the executive branch include the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment (CMMAI), the Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (MMAF), and the Minister for Foreign Affairs (MFA). These actors are selected due to their roles as active formulators and promoters of the GMF strategic narrative. In addition, these actors have the power to execute policy, either by their own volition or on behalf of the narrator-in-chief, thus making them active participants in shaping how the narrative is conveyed. Only publicly accessible speeches/statements are selected, be it in written (transcripts or web pages) or audio-visual form (videos, social media content, audio recordings). All statements are hand-coded and analysed using QualCoder.²⁰

This study focuses on analysing the prevalence of themes and patterns relating to foreign policy and the maritime domain **in actors' speeches**. Coded segments are categorised into two broad analytical categories: **'maritime' and 'development'**. **Maritime themes strictly refer to aspects relating to the seas or use of ocean space, while development themes refer to aspects relating directly to economic growth which do not directly use the seas. For example, mentions of port expansion or fisheries would fall under the theme of 'blue economy', listed under maritime, while mentions of a highway project leading to a port would fall under the theme of infrastructure, listed under development.** Due to space limitations, only selected statements are presented in this paper to show the prevalence of a specific theme. Statements are classified based on their target audience (Table 1). All translations are made by the author.

²⁰ Qualcoder is a free Python-based qualitative analysis software available at <https://github.com/ccbogel/QualCoder/releases/tag/3.4>

<i>Target audience</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Domestic populace	111
Political elite	93
Business	26
International forums	31
Unspecified international audiences	6
Total	267

Table 1 *Distribution of target audience of government speeches and statements.*

This paper proceeds in four sections. The first section traces the development of a maritime narrative since the early post-Independence era until the Widodo administration, beginning in 2014. The second section examines communicative strategies used to legitimise the GMF narrative. Drawing from the findings in the first and second sections, the third section assesses possible arguments for changes and developments in the GMF strategic narrative by examining the confluence of agential and structural factors. The fourth section concludes the paper by exploring implications for the continuity of the GMF strategic narrative after the Widodo administration.

Identifying the maritime narrative in Indonesia

The existence of elements of a maritime narrative in contemporary Indonesia can be traced back to the post-Independence era of the Sukarno administration. The building blocks for a maritime narrative originate from two sources: geography, and interpretations of pre-colonial historiography.

Geographically, Indonesia is an archipelagic state situated in a crossroads position between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, and two continents. The archipelagic identity was affirmed by the 1957 Djuanda Declaration, which declared the country's land and waters as being an

inseparable whole. At the time, the Declaration was at odds with prevailing international maritime law which did not recognise the regime of archipelagic states. This condition engendered a lengthy diplomatic struggle for the inclusion of Indonesia's 'archipelagic principle' in international maritime law. The passing of the third Law of the Sea Convention (LOSC) in 1982 enshrined the regime of archipelagic states and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which effectively tripled Indonesia's maritime territory and guaranteed its sovereign rights to explore and exploit marine resources within its waters, EEZ, and continental shelf.²¹

The second source is based on previous glory, or national myth, of the Srivijaya and Majapahit empires. These empires are not just portrayed as mighty thalassocracies, but also as the only precursors to the modern Indonesian nation-state, especially by nationalist writers.²² Although historical evidence suggests the maritime reach of these empires were more limited, it has not diluted the inspirational power of these myths, which have been incorporated into national historiography.²³

The Widodo administration was the first to formulate a strategic narrative centring on maritime affairs. The early maritime narrative was presented in his 2014 campaign. Under his leadership, Widodo promised to make Indonesia an 'independent, advanced, strong, and nationally-oriented maritime state'.²⁴ Domestically, the focus was on constructing a maritime identity, improving the maritime economy, and developing naval

²¹ Butcher & Elson, 2017

²² Muhammad Yamin, a key Indonesian politician during the struggle for independence, was heavily influenced by the legacies of the Majapahit and Srivijaya empires as evidenced in his insistence that Indonesia's territory post-independence should encompass the Malay Peninsula to align with the borders of the previous empires. His position was considered rather extreme, as there was no immediate need or justification for such territorial claims other than pre-colonial legacies. See Bahar et al., 1995.

²³ See Wood, 2005. For a critical assessment of the extents of the Srivijaya empire, particularly of the structure of the state and exercise of authority, see, among others, Kulke, 2016.

²⁴ Widodo & Kalla, 2014.

power, whereas foreign policy would prominently feature maritime border diplomacy and regional maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.²⁵

A more developed version of the narrative was introduced on the international stage during the 9th East Asia Summit (EAS) in November 2014. In his speech in front of EAS members, Widodo emphasised Indonesia's crossroads position amidst the shift of the "geo-economic and geo-political centre of gravity" from the West to East Asia. Responding to this shift, Indonesia "must assert itself as the Global Maritime Fulcrum, as a power that lies between two oceans" which will "open opportunities for Indonesia to build regional and international cooperation for the prosperity of the people". To that end, Widodo outlined five agendas: 1) reawakening Indonesia's maritime culture, 2) developing fisheries, 3) developing maritime infrastructure and connectivity, 4) prioritising maritime diplomacy to address regional maritime problems, and 5) building maritime defence.²⁶

Three years later, these agendas were further developed in the 2017 Indonesian Ocean Policy (IOP; *Kebijakan Kelautan Indonesia*), published in both English and Indonesian. The GMF vision rested on seven policy pillars: marine and human resource development; maritime security, law enforcement, and safety at sea; ocean governance and institutions; maritime economy development; sea space management and marine protection; maritime culture; and maritime diplomacy. The IOP draws from previous ideational elements of Indonesia's pre-colonial past and its non-violent diplomatic struggle for recognition of its territorial rights as a unitary archipelagic state. Indonesia's geographic position is further described as being "in a sphere of competing influence between the post-World War II dominant power [the United States] and the rising power [China]".²⁷ A notably different theme that was newly incorporated into the

²⁵ Ibid., 12-14.

²⁶ (Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2014a)

²⁷ Kementerian Koordinator Bidang Kemaritiman [Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs], 2017, p. 19)

maritime narrative is Indonesia's "strategic value for the Earth", which refers to the country's rich biodiversity. Based on this updated geopolitical position and drawing from previous historical efforts, the next step would to "change the nation's mindset, attitude, and its pattern of actions that are based on the awareness of maritime areas as a place for Indonesian to conduct ocean-oriented development". It also lays out a vision for an increased regional role for Indonesia by seeking synergy between competing geopolitical visions from China, the United States, and India through diplomacy.²⁸

The current maritime narrative crafted by the Widodo administration is presented as a long-awaited continuation of Indonesia's glorious maritime past. In this case, Widodo presents himself, and his administration, as the parties responsible for continuing and materialising the previously disrupted maritime legacies of the Srivijaya and Majapahit empires through a long-term plan of multisectoral development and maritime-oriented reforms, with the aim of elevating Indonesia's geopolitical profile as a maritime fulcrum in Southeast Asia.

Yet, despite its sound logic befitting Indonesia's archipelagic profile, the GMF as a strategic narrative has suffered from ambiguity. It is unclear whether the GMF is supposed to be a grand strategy, a policy framework, or a set of priorities. Key government officials hold differing interpretations, leading to disconcerted efforts in its implementation. Even its key strategic document, the IOP, has been criticised for being a mere "bureaucratic umbrella" instead of an integrative framework for existing government programs and its overly domestic focus.²⁹

Content analysis of government speeches corroborate these criticisms. There is an unequal distribution of maritime-specific discourses in government speeches which heavily focus on maritime economic interests (compare Figures 1 and 2). While mentions of activities relating

²⁸ Ibid., 21.

²⁹ Among the most representative of these criticisms are Ekawati, 2016 and Laksmana, 2017.

to maritime diplomacy appear with similar frequency to the blue economy, it should be noted that maritime diplomacy, although normally considered as an outward-facing activity involving the use of maritime assets to influence international relations, is mostly interpreted as actions relating to negotiations of Indonesia's maritime boundaries and/or Indonesia's participation or leadership roles in international maritime-related forums.³⁰ These findings suggest the GMF may be an economic framework, rather than a comprehensive maritime strategy.

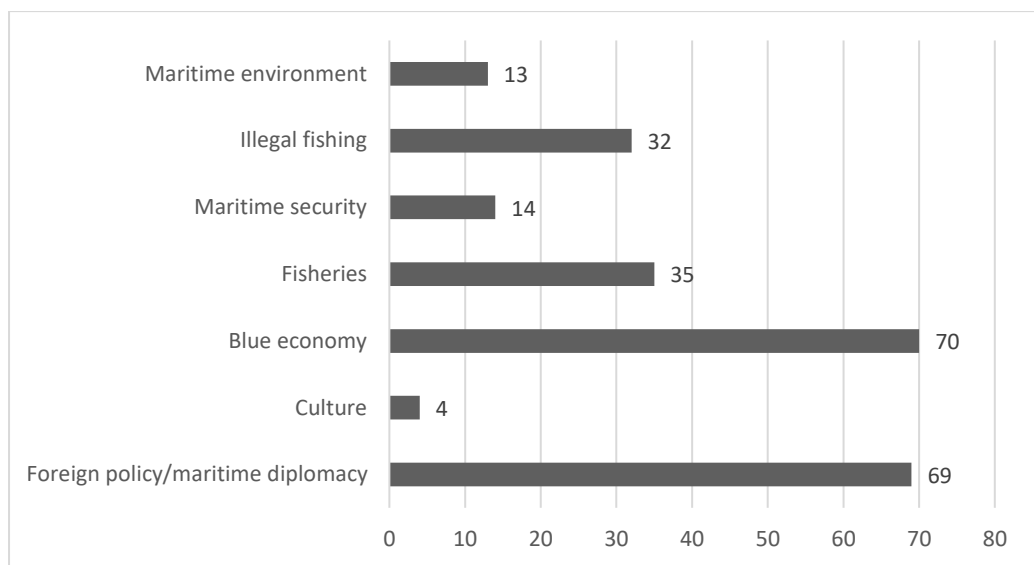


Figure 1. Distribution of maritime-related themes in government speeches (total coded segments = 237).

³⁰ For an elaboration of the concept of maritime diplomacy, see Le Miere, 2014. In its yearly performance reports, the MFA measures performance in maritime diplomacy primarily by the amount of bilateral maritime boundary delimitation agreements concluded, in addition to participation in multilateral maritime-related forums. According to Le Miere, these acts would not fall under maritime diplomacy, which emphasises the use of maritime assets (generally understood as warships) in managing international relations as opposed to the codification of laws or the use of diplomacy to manage tensions.

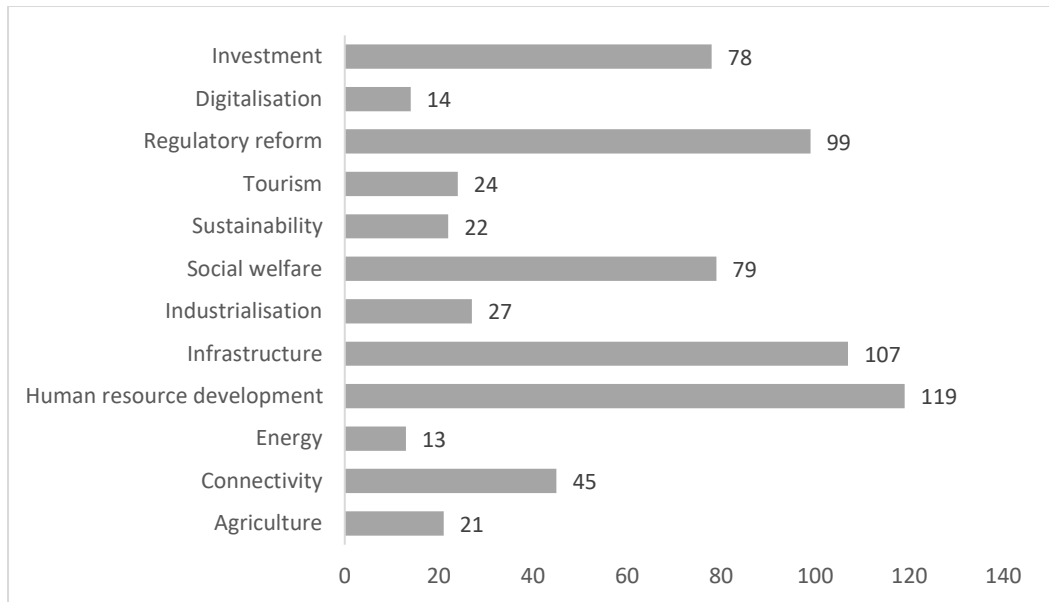


Figure 2. Frequency of development-related codes in government speeches (total coded segments = 648).

When plotted over time, the findings show a declining trend in the use of maritime-related themes. When compared with development-related themes, the use of maritime-related themes shows experience a consistent decline from 2016, in contrast to the increase in development-related codes (see Figure 3). The decline in 2020 was likely a direct impact of the **COVID-19 pandemic, which temporarily shifted the government’s focus towards health recovery and pandemic mitigation.** This recovered in 2021, as the government grew more optimistic of pandemic countermeasures, yet maritime-related themes continued to decline.

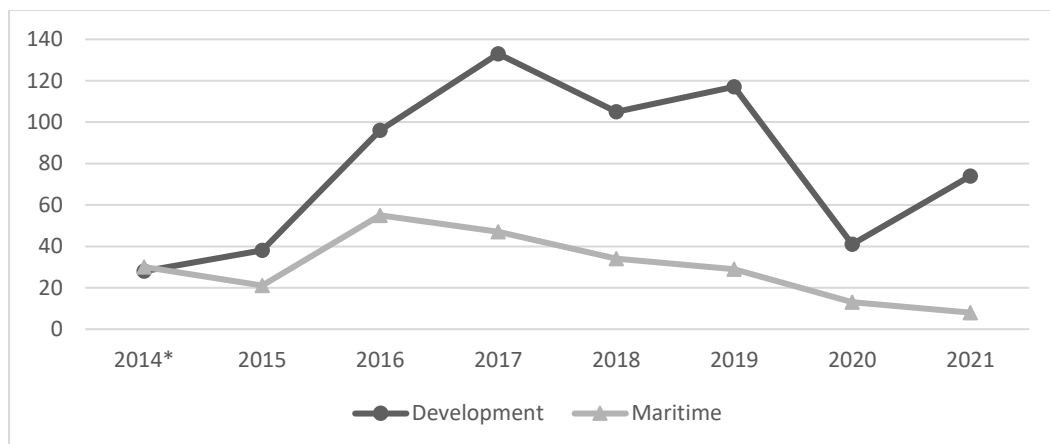


Figure 3. Frequency of development codes relative to maritime codes usage in government statements and speeches. For 2014, documents/speeches are only available starting from October, which marks the official beginning of the Widodo administration.

Conveying the maritime narrative

In terms of promoting the GMF, the use of culturally and historically significant maritime symbols are central in gaining mass support by connecting “people’s feelings and memories with a glorious past”.³¹ While this argument may seem intuitive due to the pre-colonial references used in Widodo’s notable public appearances, it falls short of recognising other methods of communication. The findings show at least three communicative strategies the administration employs to justify the GMF, comprising of:

- 1) appeal to national myth or history, or the explicit use of historically relevant literary or visual maritime symbols (e.g., delivering a victory speech on board of a *pinisi* ship);
- 2) technocratic appeal, or the use of statistics and economic reasoning, particularly in the context of economic development (e.g., “infrastructure development and investment are essential to escaping the middle-income trap”); and,

³¹ Rosyidin, 2021, p. 306

- 3) national identity assertion, or justifying policies based on a notion of national identity (e.g., “as a maritime nation, it is normal for Indonesia to be involved in building regional maritime security architecture”).

These strategies are not mutually exclusive and may be used simultaneously, even when addressing the same audience. The findings indicate a clear preference for the use of technocratic appeal in legitimising policies related to the GMF to both domestic and international audiences.

During the first half of Widodo’s first term (late 2014 to 2017), a mixture of all three communicative strategies were used. The appeal to national myth and history was the most striking. Widodo’s victory speech in 2014 was delivered on board a traditional *pinisi* boat in the Jakartan port of Sunda Kelapa. Although his speech did not specifically refer to maritime ideas—it was a plea to return to normalcy after a polarising election—the visual gesture was a prominent attempt to convey his maritime credentials.³² In his inauguration speech in October 2014, Widodo used the term ‘*jalasveva jayamahe*’, a Sanskrit phrase meaning ‘at sea, we are glorious’, after lamenting Indonesia’s long ignorance to the seas.³³ This is in contrast to the situation when the country’s ancient empires were known to be maritime empires.

The ignorance to the seas was reiterated in his remarks when bestowing the *Adibakti Mina Bahari* Award in December 2015. To the awardees, Widodo drew upon national myth to justify his maritime policies, remarking the Indonesian nation was “great because we did not turn our backs on the seas and oceans”, and referring to the Srivijaya and Majapahit empires as examples.³⁴ While delivering his opening remarks at the annual Sail Karimata, part of the annual Sail Indonesia held since 2009, in November 2016, Widodo referred to the seas as “Indonesia’s

³² BBC Indonesia, 2014

³³ Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2014b

³⁴ Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2015

economic engine”. The remarks ended with the same theme of “returning to the seas as a maritime nation”.³⁵

Explicit references to national myth started to decline from 2016. The maritime narrative shifted towards technocratic discourse centring on Indonesia’s physical maritime aspects (the archipelagic nature, vast maritime area, and strategic crossroads position) and maritime problems the country (illegal fishing, underdevelopment, and disputed maritime boundaries). The Widodo turned towards a ‘new developmental’ style of discourse, characterised by state-driven endeavours to accelerate industrialisation and economic gain with less regard for socio-cultural aspects.³⁶ A key feature of new developmentalism is its primary focus on physical development upon which ideational features may be built. In other words, the creation of a national maritime identity is expected to naturally follow from physical development of maritime space. It is likely that at this time, maritime themes became conflated under the wider theme of development, which may be found in the *Visi Indonesia 2045* document. The document, published by the National Planning Agency in 2019 on Widodo’s request, outlines the administration’s socioeconomic aspirations in 2045 in four areas: human resource development and scientific and technological mastery; sustainable economic development; development equality; and national resilience and governance.³⁷ Conforming with new developmentalism, maritime policy is subsumed under the overarching goal of sustainable development, thus rendering it a part of broader economic policy. The economic orientation of the administration’s maritime development is represented in two projects that have been consistently promoted by the administration: the sea toll road (*tol laut*) project, and efforts addressing illegal fishing and fisheries development. Compared to other maritime issues, including naval

³⁵ Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2016

³⁶ Warburton, 2018

³⁷ Badan Perencanaan Nasional [National Planning Agency], 2019

modernisation, these have remained relatively stable throughout Widodo's two periods.

In his 2015 State of the Nation address, Widodo emphasised the sea toll road as his “most important project” which he believed would “stimulate the growth of the maritime economy” as part of Indonesia's ocean policy. The importance of this project is evident as it is consistently mentioned in subsequent State of the Nation addresses until 2018, in numerous public appearances as well as in Cabinet meetings, compared to other aspects of the GMF. The *tol laut* is generally presented as instrumental to strengthening maritime identity, reflecting Widodo's developmental view of maritime governance. To illustrate, in a public lecture at Gajah Mada University in December 2014, Widodo justified *tol laut* as a solution to alleviating economic inequality between Java and Indonesia's eastern islands by reducing logistical costs.³⁸ A video promoting *tol laut* on Twitter portrayed residents of East Nusa Tenggara benefitting from the program, claiming a 10-20 per cent decrease in the price of goods. It ends by repeating the importance of the seas for Indonesia's prosperity in the 21st century.³⁹ This theme of emphasising infrastructure development has remained consistent in Widodo's public promotion of *tol laut*. Early in his second term, his Cabinet held a limited meeting focused on ways to increase the value of *tol laut*.⁴⁰

Illegal fishing and fisheries development constitute the maritime economy pillars of the GMF. To be sure, the focus on fisheries is not unique to the Widodo administration; it has been of concern for policymakers since the Suharto regime due to its lucrative potential, while also being an underdeveloped source of revenue.⁴¹ However, the Widodo administration made fisheries and threats related thereof a significant part of the

³⁸ Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2014c

³⁹ The video was originally uploaded on 18 March 2019. It was re-uploaded with a different caption on 5 March 2020. See <https://twitter.com/jokowi/status/1107588124232683520>.

⁴⁰ Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2020a

⁴¹ Butcher, 2004

maritime narrative. Widodo has repeatedly framed problems to and in fisheries in technocratic and nationalist rhetoric, particularly when highlighting solutions to illegal fishing practices by foreign fishing crews. The fusion of technocratic and nationalist rhetoric was also evident in the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (MMAF) during the tenure of then-Minister Susi Pudjiastuti. Pudjiastuti became the administration's image of asserting Indonesia's sovereignty at seas through her strong stance on combating illegal fishing and promoting sustainable fisheries.⁴² In her public lectures delivered to the Indonesian and international publics, Pudjiastuti highlighted how foreign fishers had illegally plundered Indonesia's fish stocks and that such acts were unacceptable. She then continued to promote her policies of posing a moratorium on foreign fishing licenses, limiting exploitative fishing practices, and enhancing maritime law enforcement, which she considered to be effective in curbing illegal fishing operations.⁴³ These policies further gained popular support due to prominent media exposure, which centred on the visually-striking imagery of detained fishing vessels being exploded at sea and regular video updates on social media of the arrests made by Satgas 115, an interagency and inter-ministerial task force formed to tackle illegal fishing.⁴⁴

Promoting the GMF internationally

The GMF positions Indonesia as a 'fulcrum' for the Indian and Pacific Ocean. Though it might be reasonably interpreted as signal for increased involvement in high-level strategic regional issues in the Indo-

⁴² Scarpello, 2020

⁴³ See, among others, Public Lecture delivered at Faculty of Law, Universitas Indonesia, on 17 October 2017. Full recording may be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFgywJCx7A>. A public lecture at Harvard University was also delivered, although no recording nor transcript is openly available. Excerpts of the lecture may be found at <https://news.kkp.go.id/index.php/beri-kuliah-umum-di-harvard-menteri-susi-dorong-mahasiswa-perjuangkan-hak-laut/>

⁴⁴ Liliansa, 2020

Pacific, the administration's actions are focussed on seeking gains benefitting domestic economic development. The economic orientation of the fulcrum role is evident in how the administration legitimises its pursuit of regional maritime diplomacy.

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) was a central feature in Widodo's early foreign policy. Indonesia sought to capitalise on its position as IORA chair for the 2015-2017 period to promote the GMF and its regional maritime role. In her annual press statement in 2017, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi described the Indian Ocean region as a 'hollow' (*'kosong'*) region, referring to the absence of a robust regional governance structure, contrasting it with regionalism in Southeast Asia. Indonesia's ambition was to "fill in the hollowness" (*"mengisi kekosongan"*) by bridging Africa and the Pacific and "preserving the Indian Ocean as an artery of the global economy, global security, and stability".⁴⁵ When Indonesia became the chair of IORA, it sought to ambitiously expand the scope of IORA's operations. It held the first leaders' summit, elevating what was previously a ministerial-level meeting, in 2017, which resulted in the creation of the Jakarta Concord, the IORA Action Plan for 2017-2021, and the Declaration on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism. The summit was conveyed to both international and domestic audiences as being a feat of Indonesia's maritime diplomacy, that other countries also see Indonesia as an Indo-Pacific power.⁴⁶ Indonesia's activism in IORA led to speculation that it was pivoting towards the Indian Ocean at the expense of ASEAN, which has long been regarded as a cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy.⁴⁷

Yet, despite the strategic value of IORA in the regional governance of the Indian Ocean region, after Indonesia's period as IORA chair elapsed, Indonesia's promotion of the GMF, at least in terms of its regional maritime role in the Indian Ocean, declined. Although the MFA continued

⁴⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, 2017.

⁴⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, 2018

⁴⁷ Dinarto, 2017

to promote progress in maritime diplomacy, it mostly centred on progress in maritime boundary delimitation with neighbouring countries and securing multilateral commitments in sustainable maritime economy, which aligns with the broader themes of marine economic development.⁴⁸

On the international scene, the administration, mostly represented by Widodo, repeatedly presents its achievements and progress in **improving Indonesia's openness to foreign investment and free trade**. In his first speech at the APEC CEO Forum in Beijing in November 2014, Widodo pitched his list of infrastructure projects. He ended the speech by promising to ease, if not eliminate, bureaucratic hurdles to investment. This theme was repeated in his opening remarks at the IORA Business Summit in March 2017, in which he emphasised the **"duty of my government is to reduce [regulatory] burdens that hamper business"**.⁴⁹ Moving into his second term, the passing of the controversial Omnibus Law on Job Creation (hereafter 'Omnibus Law') in 2020 and aspirations to build the new capital city entered the administration's international discourse. The passing of the Omnibus Law was used to show to the world that Indonesia was open for business, while the new capital city project was considered a way for Widodo to cement his political legacy.⁵⁰

The promotion of a more open and investor-friendly Indonesia on the international stage dovetails the development narrative at the domestic level. In speeches delivered mostly to his domestic audience, Widodo paints a concerning picture of cutthroat economic competition, fearing Indonesia will be left behind unless drastic measures are taken. Regulatory reform is presented as a **justified move to improve Indonesia's position on various international metrics, most notably the Ease of Doing Business Index, a theme which repeatedly appears in Widodo's domestic appearances in both public and limited interactions**. The discourse of competition has more recently further enhanced with themes of

⁴⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, 2019

⁴⁹ Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2017

⁵⁰ Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2020b

automation, digital transformation, and sustainable development, in addition to the prospects of post-COVID economic recovery, which were featured in Indonesia's G20 presidency agenda.

Why the focus on development?

Our findings show that maritime themes have recently been overshadowed by themes of development, mostly related to infrastructure and human resource development. As a result, the strategic narrative of the GMF has shifted from Indonesia's aspirations of becoming a regional maritime power to focussing on domestic maritime development. To understand why this shift occurred, agential, social, and political contexts need to be considered. This in turn affects agential preferences in using communicative strategies to legitimise their narratives.

The advent of regional elections in Indonesia has provided opportunities for candidates without close ties to the political regime to obtain positions of regional leadership. This has led to the rise of 'innovative technocrats', leaders characterised by policies centring on delivering tangible outcomes rather than acting as traditional extensions of the central government's power.⁵¹ As the main representative of the innovative technocrats, Widodo succeeded in seizing political power by burnishing his credentials as a humble, engaging, but most importantly, performing local leader.⁵² This was followed with a rising public perception in Indonesia that the main role of government is to deliver economic performance, a sentiment further expressed in Widodo's remarks that the main goal of democratic governance is to achieve prosperity and economic growth.⁵³ The pursuit of economic development as the main directive of governance has led to the rise of what Jefferson Ng terms 'performance politics', wherein the legitimacy of the political leader is

⁵¹ Hatherell, 2019

⁵² Hatherell, 2014

⁵³ Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2018

based less on their commitment to upholding democratic values and more on performative and instrumental logic. In other words, as democratic values are considered secondary to economic development, what matters more to the citizenry is a government which delivers tangible results (Figure 4).⁵⁴

This depiction of democracy in Indonesia aligns with observations of prevailing acceptance of the technocratic national narrative in Indonesia—wherein the main focus of governance is to solve tangible problems that have a direct impact on the citizenry—suggesting a cordial alignment between agential preferences and structural conditions.⁵⁵ The maritime narrative, which initially covered a wide range of themes, became narrowed to elements which directly serve the narrative of development. As a result, communicative strategies legitimising the GMF leaned towards technocratic appeal because these strategies are perceived to be effective, as they aligned with local context.

⁵⁴ Ng, 2023

⁵⁵ Hatherell & Welsh, 2021, p. 44

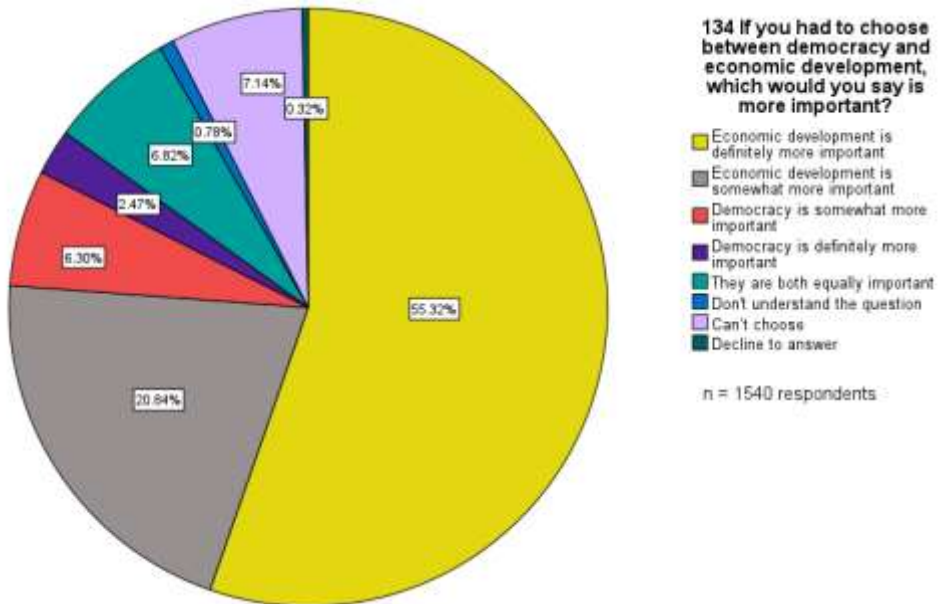


Figure 4. Perception of the importance of upholding democratic values vis-à-vis economic growth. Data from Asian Barometer Survey, Wave 5, 2019. Author's illustration.

The alignment of agential preferences and domestic structural conditions also explain the relative absence of strategic and non-economic elements of the maritime narrative and the overemphasis on developmental themes in communication towards the international audience. First, the use of national myth on the international stage would have little effect, due to the lack of affinity of the international audience with Indonesia's pre-colonial history, as Indonesia's supposed glorious maritime past holds little meaning to international audiences; what matters more is Indonesia's current and future economic potential, in addition to its geopolitical role. Second, being a pragmatic technocrat, Widodo prefers to present Indonesia's economic achievements and his grand projects as opposed to Indonesia's normative position in foreign

policy. He is, as Bland writes, “all about the practicalities, [and] ... not interested in concepts”.⁵⁶

These dynamics may be seen in Indonesia’s time as IORA chair, which was viewed as an opportunity to widely promote the GMF. Rosyidin attributes the attention towards the Indian Ocean as a practice of expanding Indonesia’s sphere of influence, following a vaguely-defined ‘strategic logic’ inspired by the Srivijaya kingdom.⁵⁷ Instead, the findings indicate Indonesia’s turn towards IORA to be more consistent with the current administration seeking additional economic linkages to fund its infrastructure projects and elevate Indonesia’s economic and political profile, and less to do with promoting a maritime grand strategy.⁵⁸ In his speeches to both IORA leaders and the business community, Widodo repeatedly seeks economic links between IORA members and regional cooperation, which has given the impression that Indonesia’s leadership and commitment to IORA is largely transactional and not expected to endure. Largely absent in his speeches are references to plans on Indonesia’s contributions to maritime security governance in the region, which remains a substantial concern for IORA members especially with rising Sino-Indian rivalry.⁵⁹

Indonesia’s period as IORA leader also reveals its selective emphasis of communicative strategies in promoting its maritime narrative, which has effects on subsequent promotions of Indonesia as a ‘maritime fulcrum’. After IORA, the maritime narrative has mostly been limited to asserting its openness to international trade and investment and willingness to uphold maritime cooperation, while avoiding assertions or actions which could jeopardise Indonesia’s current standing. This shift in narrative, which underplays Indonesia’s strategic role in favour of its

⁵⁶ Bland, 2020

⁵⁷ Rosyidin, 2021, p. 308

⁵⁸ Supriyanto, 2017

⁵⁹ On Sino-Indian rivalry, see, among others, Brewster, 2015.

economic role, may be attributed to hedging behaviour, wherein states actively attempt to retain autonomy vis-à-vis great powers.⁶⁰

Hedging, however, only provides a partial explanation. Domestically, this decision is also shaped by a confluence of agential preferences and domestic structure. Widodo's administration requires significant foreign investment to fund its ambitious infrastructure projects. To seek funding, Widodo has repeatedly urged his administration to seek foreign investment, particularly from China, which has emerged as a dominant funder of new infrastructure projects in Indonesia. Cooperation with China has been framed as a convergence of China's Maritime Silk Road and Indonesia's GMF, despite only two agreements being of maritime nature, while thirteen other agreements are related to infrastructure.⁶¹ Widodo's closeness with China remains despite China's increasingly aggressive behaviour which has affected Indonesian maritime security, to which Indonesia has mostly responded by increasing presence near the disputed waters and diplomatic notes. These responses, however, have been hindered by domestic actors having close business links to China.⁶² Regionally, Indonesia's maritime strategy has focused multilateral maritime cooperation, which is considered a safer strategy as it would provide the investment Widodo needs to fund the country's infrastructure projects while also projecting an image of Indonesia as an amicable middle power. Focusing on maritime security cooperation involving regional militaries has generally been avoided, unless when conducted in a multilateral setting and focusing on building capacity in non-traditional security, such as humanitarian assistance and information sharing. It is not that regional maritime cooperation has languished during the Widodo administration, but rather, mentions of

⁶⁰ Kuik, 2016

⁶¹ Lalisang & Candra, 2020

⁶² Laksmna, 2016; Syailendra, 2017

events involving maritime cooperation are comparably less than that of the maritime economy.⁶³

Conclusion: the continuity of the Global Maritime Fulcrum

This paper sought to critically examine the emergence and conveyance of the GMF as a maritime strategic narrative. It has shown that previous claims of national myth being a central legitimating feature of the GMF narrative to be incomplete. National myth, drawing from nationalist interpretations of Indonesian pre-colonial history, has only been a **marginal legitimating factor of Indonesia's maritime narrative**. Instead, this paper has found themes of development, conveyed through technocratic appeal, to be a more significant legitimating factor of the GMF narrative. In doing so, this paper contributes to the emerging application of the strategic narratives framework to understand how political leaders formulate and convey narratives to legitimise policies.

This paper has also found that the Widodo's administration's preference for the use of technocratic appeal to convey the GMF narrative to be sourced from an alignment of agential preferences, namely Widodo's technocratic nature and preference for development-oriented policies, and domestic socio-political conditions favouring economic development, to be the main reasons for the overlap of the maritime narrative into narratives of development. Ironically, this choice has caused the maritime narrative to recede from strategic discourse both domestically and even more so internationally as themes of development often overlap with maritime themes, resulting in the dilution of maritime themes in the discourse, manifested in the perceived decline of the GMF.

This paper is a preliminary attempt at applying the concept of strategic narratives in analysing a thematic issue in Indonesian politics. In terms of empirical data, the diversity of the dataset remains limited. A **significant portion of the coded data is drawn from Widodo's speeches and**

⁶³ For recent developments in Indonesia's regional maritime cooperation, see Supriyanto, 2022.

statements. Though from a methodological standpoint, this may be defended due to Widodo's unique position as narrator-in-chief and the heavily-centralised character of Indonesia's policymaking structures under his administration, further improvements to the dataset would entail the addition and coding of other publicly available statements from other government offices such as the MMAF and CMMA, which would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of how government officials interpret the themes within the GMF narrative and its degree of alignment. This paper has also not addressed the issue of narrative reception, particularly by domestic and international actors, which is important for gaining a deeper and fuller understanding of the GMF as a strategic narrative at the international level.

Although the theoretical approach that informs this paper may be considered new, its findings further corroborate previous observations of a decline in Indonesia's maritime strategy. Though the GMF may still be present as a long-term aspiration and strategic framework, the current administration's approach to the maritime narrative is evidently heavily geared towards development, which dilutes the core maritime themes of the narrative. However, this paper does not necessarily share the pessimistic view that the GMF has been completely abandoned. Given the long-term nature of the GMF as either a strategy, a policy, or set of ideals, the recession of themes related to maritime security, especially in geopolitical terms, from the discourse may be attributed to a more practical matter of prioritisation, which is shaped heavily by agential preferences. The main issue for the GMF, then, is of continuity, namely whether figures in the succeeding administration will share similar visions and priorities as the current administration, and to what extent the succeeding administration will be willing to build on the initial ideals which inform the GMF, especially in less-prioritised fields such as maritime security and culture.

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