

Continuity and Discontinuity of National Roles in Middle-Power States: The Case of Indonesia's Foreign Policy

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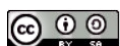
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Abstract

This paper examines the continuity and discontinuity of national roles adopted by middle-power states, with Indonesia as a case study. It focuses on two auxiliary roles linked to Indonesia's master role as a regional leader. The first is Indonesia's role as a promoter of democracy through the Bali Democracy Forum, a role that continued from the administration of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014) to that of Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo (2014-2024). The second is Indonesia's role in constructing a maritime cooperation framework under the Global Maritime Fulcrum policy initiated during Widodo's first term, but which saw discontinuation in his second term. This paper seeks to explain why one auxiliary role persisted while the other did not. Drawing on national role conception theory, particularly the distinction between master and auxiliary roles, it argues that the sustainability of auxiliary roles depends not only on external expectations aligned with the master role, but also on internal legitimacy and support. In the case of the Global Maritime Fulcrum policy, strong domestic contestation undermined the auxiliary role, despite its alignment with Indonesia's regional leadership ambitions.

Keywords: National Role Conception; middle power; Indonesia; foreign policy; Global Maritime Fulcrum; Role Continuity



Introduction

The foreign policy behaviour of middle-power states has garnered considerable scholarly interest due to their unique positioning between great powers and small states. While they lack the material capabilities of major powers, middle powers often exercise influence through ideational leadership, institution-building, and the projection of normative agendas.¹ A key analytical framework for understanding such behaviour is national role conception (NRC) theory, which explores how states define and enact their roles in the international system based on internal self-perceptions and external expectations.² Subsequent developments in NRC theory have introduced a distinction between ‘master roles’, which are dominant and enduring foreign policy identities, and more flexible ‘auxiliary roles’, which serve to operationalize and legitimize the master role within specific issue domains.³

Indonesia is widely recognized as a middle power and offers a compelling case for examining the dynamics of continuity and change in national role conception. Since the early post-Reformasi period, successive Indonesian administrations have consistently articulated the country’s identity as a regional leader in Southeast Asia. However, the specific roles and initiatives adopted to substantiate this leadership ambition have varied considerably across presidential administrations.

This paper focuses on two auxiliary roles that reflect divergent trajectories: Indonesia’s role as a promoter of democracy through the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF), and its role as a Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) in pursuing maritime-oriented development and diplomacy. The former, launched under then-President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014), has exhibited remarkable continuity under his successor, President Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo (2014–2024). In contrast, the GMF, introduced

¹ Teo 2022

² Holsti 1970; Thies 2017

³ Cantir and Kaarbo 2012

during Widodo's first term (2014-2019) as a flagship foreign policy vision, was largely deprioritized in his second term (2019–2024).

This divergence invites deeper inquiry into the factors that render certain auxiliary roles more sustainable than others, even when both are framed as instruments to support Indonesia's master role as a regional leader. While the BDF has gained institutional legitimacy and cross-administrational support, the GMF appears to have struggled with continuity, despite initial enthusiasm and strategic coherence. The contrast underscores the importance of both domestic political alignments and international reception in shaping the durability of auxiliary foreign policy roles.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the literature review and theoretical framework. This is followed by a discussion of the research methodology employed in the study. The paper then elaborates on Indonesia's positioning and identity as a middle power, before analysing the two auxiliary roles that constitute the empirical focus of the paper.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Scholarly discussions on national roles in foreign policy have expanded significantly since Holsti's (1970) foundational work on role theory, which proposed that states adopt patterned behaviours, referred to as 'national roles', that guide their foreign policy decisions. Subsequent research has refined this concept by connecting it to role socialization, bureaucratic politics, and identity construction.⁴ Scholars have used the NRC theory to examine how states manage role continuity and change, particularly during leadership transitions or systemic shifts.

In parallel, the literature on middle powers has sought to explain how countries such as Canada, Australia, South Korea, and, more recently,

⁴ Breuning 2011; Thies 2012

Indonesia, project influence disproportionate to their material capabilities.⁵ These states often pursue niche diplomacy, normative entrepreneurship, and regional leadership.⁶ Indonesia has increasingly been positioned as an ‘emerging middle power’ in Southeast Asia, combining diplomatic activism with identity-driven initiatives.⁷

Despite a growing body of literature on Indonesia’s foreign policy and national role conceptions,⁸ an empirical gap remains in understanding the factors that contribute to the sustainability or discontinuation of specific foreign policy roles across leadership transitions. Much of the existing scholarship has focused on the formulation or symbolic legitimation of national roles, often overlooking the processes of role contestation, institutionalization, and adaptation that determine whether these roles endure or fade over time.⁹ However, there is limited empirical analysis of how such roles evolve in response to shifts in domestic political contexts and leadership preferences. This gap underscores the need for a more nuanced examination of the internal contestations and institutional dynamics that shape the continuity or disruption of foreign policy roles.

NRC theory indeed offers a valuable lens for understanding how foreign policy roles are constructed by decision-making elites under the influence of both domestic imperatives and international expectations. However, much of the existing application of NRC has focused on the initial construction and framing of roles¹⁰, paying less attention to the politics of role contestation and the conditions under which roles persist or decline, particularly in the case of auxiliary roles. Although the

⁵ Fealy and White 2016; Karim 2018

⁶ Chapnick 1999; Jordaan 2003

⁷ Evan A. Laksmana 2011; Thies and Sari 2018; Umar 2023

⁸ Agastia 2020; Borchers 2013; Dannhauer 2024; Karim 2018; Rosyidin 2021; Rüland 2017; Thies and Sari 2018

⁹ Agastia 2020; Borchers 2013; Dannhauer 2024; Karim 2018; Rosyidin 2021; Rüland 2017; Thies and Sari 2018

¹⁰ Aggestam 1999; Thies and Sari 2018

distinction between master and auxiliary roles has been acknowledged,¹¹ it has not been systematically analysed in relation to questions of role sustainability and change in the Indonesian case. This paper seeks to address this gap by investigating how internal legitimacy, elite consensus, and alignment with long-term status aspirations affect the durability of auxiliary roles in foreign policy practice.

This paper contributes to these debates by conducting a comparative analysis of two auxiliary roles that is Indonesia's promotion of democracy through the BDF and its maritime engagement through the GMF. The analysis seeks to understand how both internal and external dynamics shape the durability of foreign policy roles in the context of a middle power.

By analysing the two contrasting cases of BDF and GMF, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of national role continuity in middle-power states. It argues that the endurance of auxiliary roles is shaped not only by structural factors or alignment with international expectations, but also by domestic political legitimacy, institutional support, and the capacity of roles to adapt within changing policy environments.

National Role Conception Theory

Originally developed by K.J. Holsti (1970), NRC theory posits that states act not solely in response to external pressures or material capabilities, but according to the roles they perceive and are expected to play in the international system. These roles are shaped by a combination of internal identity narratives and external recognition, making NRC theory particularly well-suited for analysing the foreign policy behaviour of middle powers that rely on ideational and normative leadership rather than coercive means.

¹¹ Breuning 2011; Breuning and Pechenina 2020; Cantir and Kaarbo 2012

A key distinction within NRC theory is between master roles and auxiliary roles. Master roles represent the overarching foreign policy identity of a state which is often relatively stable across administrations such as Indonesia's self-perception as a regional leader in Southeast Asia. In contrast, auxiliary roles are supportive functions that operationalize the master role in specific policy domains. These tend to be more contingent, dynamic, and vulnerable to change.

The literature shows that auxiliary roles in foreign policy are shaped by three interrelated factors. First, roles depend on the degree of alignment with the master role. Auxiliary roles that clearly reinforce a state's dominant foreign policy identity, such as regional leadership, are more likely to be sustained over time. Second, sustainability is influenced by external validation and international relevance. Roles that are acknowledged and supported by international partners tend to gain legitimacy and resilience. Third, domestic legitimacy and institutionalization are crucial. Endurance across political transitions requires internal support, including bureaucratic capacity, elite consensus, and societal resonance.

The social embeddedness of prevailing narratives can either support or hinder auxiliary role sustainability. For instance, the GMF attempted to shift Indonesia's strategic orientation from a land-based paradigm to a maritime-based one. However, the initiative did not fully succeed due to the entrenched land-based orientation, shaped by longstanding narratives and institutional priorities that continued to privilege terrestrial development over maritime perspectives (Alatas and Budiman 2023). Changing such a paradigm requires not only symbolic redefinition but also practical adjustments in economic, political, and security sectors, making it a particularly challenging transformation.

By applying the NRC analytical framework to the cases of the BDF and GMF, this study explores why certain auxiliary roles endure across administrations while others falter despite initial alignment with the

master role. Furthermore, it highlights how domestic political contestation and shifting priorities can override external logics of sustainability

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to analyse the continuity and discontinuity of auxiliary roles in Indonesia's foreign policy across two presidential administrations. The case study method is well-suited for this research, as it allows for in-depth examination of complex foreign policy behaviour within its specific political, institutional, and historical context.¹²

The analysis focuses on two auxiliary roles that relate to Indonesia's overarching master role as a regional leader: the promotion of democracy through the BDF and maritime diplomacy through the GMF initiative. These cases were selected using a most-similar systems design,¹³ as both roles emerged under democratic administrations, were aligned with Indonesia's leadership narrative, and received significant international attention, yet diverged in terms of outcome. This design allows for analytical leverage in identifying causal mechanisms behind the persistence or termination of national roles.

Data collection relies on document analysis of both primary and secondary sources, including official government documents and reports; peer-reviewed journal articles and think tank publications; and media coverage and expert commentary from reputable news outlets.

To trace the evolution of these two auxiliary roles, this study applies process tracing,¹⁴ focusing on three analytical dimensions: (1) alignment

¹² Beach and Pedersen 2013; Bourchier 2019; Yin 2018

¹³ Fleming 1970

¹⁴ Beach and Pedersen 2013

with the master role;¹⁵ (2) external recognition and international legitimacy;¹⁶ and (3) domestic political support and institutionalization.¹⁷

Rather than seeking broad generalizations, this research aims to provide a theory-guided explanation¹⁸ of role dynamics in the context of a single middle power. The goal is to contribute to broader theorization on the sustainability of national role conceptions in foreign policy, particularly in states that rely more on ideational and normative strategies than on material coercion.

Indonesia: A Middle Power with Regional Leadership Role

Indonesia is frequently identified as a middle power, a status that carries with it certain role expectations in international relations. While the concept remains contested, there is broad scholarly consensus that Indonesia qualifies as a middle power due to its demographic weight, natural resources, and a diplomatic history that demonstrates the ability to exercise influence through multiple foreign policy roles.¹⁹

Middle powers are generally distinguished by a normative orientation, a preference for multilateralism, and identity-driven foreign policy behaviour.²⁰ Instead of relying on material dominance, middle powers tend to exert influence through soft power, institutional entrepreneurship, and coalition-building. Indonesia's foreign policy behaviour often reflects these characteristics, particularly through initiatives such as democracy promotion via the BDF and maritime diplomacy under the GMF.

¹⁵ Thies 2012, 2017

¹⁶ Breuning 2011

¹⁷ Rüländ 2017

¹⁸ Gerring 2006

¹⁹ Anwar 2000

²⁰ Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal 1993

Understanding Indonesia's foreign policy requires first defining the middle power concept. Typically, middle powers are states with sufficient material capabilities, diplomatic resources, and regional strategic positioning, but they do not possess the global dominance of great powers.²¹ They often act as mediators, stabilizers, or norm entrepreneurs, seeking to uphold a rules-based international order and promote peaceful conflict resolution.²²

Historically and strategically, Indonesia's foreign policy conduct suggests a master role as a regional leader in Southeast Asia. This role is shaped by various historical, demographic, and geopolitical factors, including its status as the largest country in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) by population, its role as a founding member of ASEAN in 1967, and its active participation in regional multilateral forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Indonesia's consistency in performing this leadership role can be observed in its mediation efforts in regional conflicts, its promotion of ASEAN's non-intervention norm, and its normative diplomacy through platforms like the BDF.

The assumption of Indonesia's regional leadership is not merely declarative but constructed through historical experience, normative commitments, institutional engagements, and domestic narratives. Since its independence in 1945, Indonesia has taken on a variety of roles that reflect its middle power status, even though the term itself has seldom been explicitly invoked in its foreign policy discourse. Instead, Indonesia has consistently adhered to the principle of free and active foreign policy (*bebas dan aktif*), aiming to preserve autonomy without aligning with major power blocs while actively contributing to global peace and stability.²³

²¹ Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal 1993

²² Chapnick 1999

²³ Anwar 2000

Historically, Indonesia has played a significant role as a regional leader and a promoter of solidarity among developing nations. This is exemplified by its hosting of the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, which marked a symbolic moment for postcolonial states to unite and assert their presence in the international system.²⁴ In the post-Reformasi era, Indonesia has increasingly acted as a peace mediator, particularly in Southeast Asia, participating in conflict resolution efforts in Cambodia, Mindanao, and more recently, in addressing issues related to Myanmar (Alexandra 2017; Reuters 2024), while maintaining neutrality in major power rivalries, notably between the United States and China.²⁵ These actions bolster Indonesia's credibility as a regional norm entrepreneur.

Within the NRC framework, Indonesia has consistently positioned itself as a regional leader in Southeast Asia. This master role has been supported by several auxiliary roles, including that of a bridge-builder between developing countries and major powers, as well as a promoter of peace and stability in the region.²⁶ The continuity of these roles reflects Indonesia's flexibility in adapting its auxiliary roles in response to changing regional and global dynamics, without abandoning its core identity as a middle power.

Indonesia's regional leadership aspirations are also backed by its material capabilities. As the most populous country in Southeast Asia, home to roughly 40% of ASEAN's population, combined with its vast geographic expanse and the largest economy in the region, Indonesia possesses the structural conditions that support a leadership role. These attributes generate both domestic and international expectations for Indonesia to assume a more active role in maintaining regional peace and security. Indonesia's central role in the founding of ASEAN in 1967,

²⁴ Leifer 2014

²⁵ Anwar 2023; Mubah 2020; Novotny 2010

²⁶ Sheany 2017

alongside Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, further reinforces this expectation.²⁷

Domestically, Indonesian political elites often frame foreign policy roles through the lens of nationalism and the identity of Indonesia as a 'great nation'.²⁸ This narrative is reinforced through education, media, and official state documents such as the country's 2045 Vision, which envisions Indonesia as a future regional and global leader.

Institutionally, Indonesia has actively pursued the entrenchment of its roles through multilateral diplomacy. It has established a reputation as a leader within regional multilateral forums such as ARF, EAS, and BDF. Through these platforms, Indonesia advocates for democratic norms, inclusivity, and openness, values that reinforce its role as a normative leader in Southeast Asia.²⁹

Indonesia's NRC: The Case of the BDF and GMF

Within the NRC framework, a master role refers to a state's core and relatively stable identity in international affairs such as serving as a regional leader or middle power. In contrast, auxiliary roles are supporting or complementary functions that reinforce, legitimize, or enhance the enactment of the master role.³⁰

Indonesia's consistency in articulating and enacting its NRCs in foreign policy is largely influenced by elite consensus and institutional coherence. In democratic states like Indonesia, elite contestation among politicians, bureaucrats, and non-state actors plays a significant role in shaping the persistence or discontinuity of particular national roles.³¹ NRC contestation can occur both horizontally (among elites) and vertically

²⁷ Anwar 2000; Leifer 2014

²⁸ Fealy and White 2016

²⁹ Rüländ 2009

³⁰ Breuning and Pechenina 2020; Wehner 2015

³¹ Wibisono 2009

(between elites and the public), both of which influence the stability and sustainability of a given NRC.³²

Two illustrative cases of Indonesia's consistent NRC enactment are the BDF and GMF. The BDF reflects Indonesia's auxiliary role as a promoter of democratic norms, which supports its master role as a regional leader. Initiated in 2008, the BDF demonstrates Indonesia's effort to institutionalize its commitment to democratic dialogue and peaceful regional engagement.

Meanwhile, the GMF, launched under President Widodo's administration, embodies Indonesia's auxiliary role as a maritime axis power, reinforcing its identity as a strategic middle power in the Indo-Pacific. The GMF highlights Indonesia's geopolitical position and ambition to act as a bridge between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, while strengthening regional connectivity, maritime security, and economic integration.³³

Together, these cases reflect the interplay between Indonesia's enduring master role and its adaptive auxiliary roles, shaped by both domestic political contestation and international strategic considerations.

Continuity: The Case of the BDF

The BDF, initiated by Yudhoyono in 2008, has remained a consistent part of Indonesia's foreign policy, continuing into the Widodo administration from 2014. This continuity underscores Indonesia's auxiliary role as a promoter of inclusive and dialogical democracy. Although the role was initially unprecedented and faced both domestic and international criticism,³⁴ the forum was maintained under Jokowi despite concerns that his foreign policy focus on economic interests might

³² Cantir and Kaarbo 2012

³³ E. Laksmana 2019

³⁴ Karim 2021

lead to the marginalization of initiatives like the BDF, which do not yield immediate economic benefits.³⁵

The BDF was envisioned as a regional and international platform to advance democratic values through open dialogue, eschewing conditionality or coercion.³⁶ This initiative aligns with Indonesia's master role as a regional leader and democratic model, particularly within Southeast Asia, where democratic consolidation remains uneven.³⁷ By creating a space for inclusive discourse, Indonesia sought to position itself not as an exporter of liberal democracy but as a facilitator of cross-regional dialogue³⁸, attracting participation from a diverse range of countries, including non-liberal states such as China and several ASEAN members. While the forum did not consistently involve all heads of government under Widodo's leadership—reflecting the fact that such representation was not originally intended (Suwanti and Anthoni 2019)—it nonetheless maintained strong domestic support and sustained international interest. (Septiari 2021)

From the NRC theoretical perspective, the BDF reflects a consistent auxiliary role that has been internalized by decision-makers, institutionalized within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and legitimized by regional and international actors. Its persistence during the Widodo administration, despite Widodo's more inward-focused leadership style, suggests that the BDF has become a normalized component of Indonesia's diplomatic identity and soft power repertoire.³⁹

Indonesia's role as a democracy promoter underwent a significant process of socialization, internalization, and institutionalization, particularly during the post-Reformasi period. A key figure in this development was then-Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda (2001-2009),

³⁵ Utama 2024

³⁶ Rosyidin 2020

³⁷ Sukma 2011

³⁸ Rosyidin 2020

³⁹ Anwar 2020

who recognized the importance of embedding democratic norms and values into Indonesia's foreign policy agenda. Wirajuda emphasized that Indonesia's democratic transition endowed it with the legitimacy and responsibility to promote democracy internationally.⁴⁰

This role was further reinforced by his successor, Marty Natalegawa (2009-2014), who continued the trajectory of norm entrepreneurship and worked to institutionalize this role within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and broader foreign policy frameworks.⁴¹ The combined efforts of both foreign ministers ensured that Indonesia's democracy promotion agenda, particularly through the BDF, became a formalized and sustained component of its diplomatic repertoire.

The emergence of this role coincided with the transition to democratic governance in Indonesia after 1998⁴², which provided strong domestic legitimacy for adopting a democracy-promoting identity. Internationally, this coincided with the third wave of global democratization, which swept through various parts of the world, including parts of the Middle East.⁴³ Indonesian scholars and policymakers such as Rizal Sukma argued that Indonesia should act as a model and actively share its democratic experience, particularly with other Muslim-majority states undergoing political change.⁴⁴

Indonesia's democratic identity also played a key role in shaping reform proposals within ASEAN, such as the ASEAN Charter and the establishment of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. These initiatives were strongly influenced by Indonesia's post-Reformasi commitment to regional norm-setting.⁴⁵ As a result, Indonesia

⁴⁰ Wirajuda 2012

⁴¹ Natalegawa 2019

⁴² Rosyidin 2020

⁴³ Sukma 2011

⁴⁴ Sukma 2011

⁴⁵ Natalegawa 2019

developed a tradition of offering reformist ideas within ASEAN aimed at enhancing democratic norms and institutional capacity.

The launch of the BDF marked the institutional culmination of Indonesia's role as a democracy promoter. The forum received broad international recognition for its ability to convene leaders from both democratic and non-democratic countries in the Indo-Pacific region for open, inclusive dialogue on democratic values. However, the election of President Widodo in 2014 raised concerns that this role might be abandoned. Widodo's NRC diverged significantly from that of Yudhoyono. Rather than emphasizing values-based diplomacy, Widodo prioritized economic diplomacy that yielded tangible domestic benefits.⁴⁶ Normative roles, such as democracy promotion, were perceived by some within his administration as lacking direct relevance to national interests and as resource-draining initiatives.⁴⁷

Furthermore, under Widodo, democracy and human rights were no longer prioritized in Indonesia's foreign policy or domestic agenda.⁴⁸ There was growing concern about democratic backsliding, with reports of weakened democratic institutions and restrictions on political opposition. These developments reinforced the perception that Jokowi did not internalize an NRC of democracy promotion, unlike Yudhoyono, who had actively championed Indonesia's democratic credentials.

Contrary to initial concerns, the Widodo administration did not discontinue Indonesia's role as a promoter of democracy, and the BDF has continued, albeit not with the same level of prominence as under Yudhoyono. One reason for the BDF's continuity lies in its function in restoring Indonesia's position as a regional leader, particularly following a period of inward-focused governance during the post-Reformasi transition. The BDF is widely recognized as one of Indonesia's key foreign

⁴⁶ Karim 2020

⁴⁷ Karim 2017

⁴⁸ Gabrillin and Krisiandi 2018

policy innovations in the region.⁴⁹ It has served as a platform for exchanging ideas, fostering cooperation, and promoting democratic principles such as transparency and good governance in a non-confrontational manner.

Crucially, the BDF gained legitimacy because it did not aim to judge or condemn countries for lacking democratic credentials. Instead, it focused on sharing best practices in governance that could improve state capacity and public welfare, which is an approach that appealed even to non-democratic states. This non-coercive, inclusive orientation aligned with both foreign expectations and Yudhoyono's vision for Indonesia to reassert leadership in Southeast Asia, especially after a period of perceived diplomatic withdrawal.⁵⁰

As noted earlier, the institutionalization of the BDF was significantly shaped by the leadership of Wirajuda and Natalegawa, both of whom championed the program's development and integration into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' institutional framework. This reflects a strong bureaucratic consensus that distinguishes the BDF from other foreign policy initiatives such as the GMF, which is discussed in the following section.

Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has maintained a consistent commitment to the BDF, viewing it as an instrument of soft diplomacy that avoids elite resistance due to its non-confrontational and normative character. Today, the BDF is officially embedded in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' structure, under the Directorate of Public Diplomacy, and is included in the Strategic Plan 2020-2024 as part of Indonesia's agenda to enhance its global image and project soft power.⁵¹

This bureaucratic institutionalization suggests that the BDF's sustainability is not solely contingent on the president's personal NRC. In

⁴⁹ Fitriani 2015

⁵⁰ Sukma, 2011; Karim, 2020

⁵¹ Rosyidin and Kusumawardhana 2024

other words, Widodo continued Indonesia's role as a democracy promoter primarily because the program was embedded within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an institution historically oriented toward value-based diplomacy.

This case highlights that when an NRC is strongly constructed and maintained by key elite actors and institutions, its continuity is more likely, even under leadership changes. The BDF has faced no significant elite-level contestation due to its normative, apolitical nature, and minimal interference with economic or security interests. This observation contrasts sharply with the fate of the GMF, whose role conception encountered more contestation and discontinuity, an issue explored in the next section.

Role in the Global Maritime Fulcrum

The GMF represents one of the most notable breakthroughs in Indonesia's national role during the first period of the Widodo presidency (2014-2019). Introduced in 2014, the GMF aimed to reposition Indonesia as a maritime axis connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans. It sought to revitalize the archipelago's maritime identity through a comprehensive agenda that included maritime diplomacy, naval modernization, port development, and the enhancement of regional maritime governance.⁵²

Importantly, the GMF aligns with Indonesia's broader master role conception as a regional leader. It was envisioned to strengthen Indonesia's strategic influence and elevate its position as a global maritime power. Upon its launch, the GMF was widely welcomed both domestically and internationally. At home, academics, policy experts, and the general public perceived the GMF as a long-overdue recognition of Indonesia's maritime character, especially considering that more than

⁵² Gindarsah and Priamarizki 2015

65% of the country's territory is ocean.⁵³ Widodo frequently highlighted the strategic neglect of Indonesia's maritime backyard, and used the GMF to correct this imbalance in national development priorities.

The GMF was articulated through a structured framework that includes rebuilding maritime culture; sustainable management of marine resources; development of maritime infrastructure and connectivity; enhancing human resource capacity and marine research; maritime diplomacy, and empowerment of coastal communities.⁵⁴

Internationally, the GMF was also met with optimism. Much like the BDF, which had established Indonesia's leadership in democratic diplomacy, the GMF was expected to assert Indonesia's prominence in the maritime domain. Major powers such as the United States, China, and Australia expressed interest in the GMF, sending delegations to understand Indonesia's strategic plans.⁵⁵ Discussions were also initiated on how the GMF would align or interact with regional initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative.⁵⁶

One of the GMF's hallmark initiatives was the creation of a 'sea toll road' aimed at improving inter-island connectivity and reducing logistical costs. Additionally, GMF-related programs targeted maritime sovereignty through enhanced maritime security operations, including the prevention of illegal fishing by foreign vessels. These efforts were particularly championed by then-Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Susi Pudjiastuti, whose campaigns received widespread domestic and international support.⁵⁷

To promote GMF globally, key Indonesian officials were active in international diplomacy. Widodo delivered speeches on Indonesia's maritime vision at the International Maritime Organization in London and

⁵³ Laksmana 2019; Putri 2023

⁵⁴ Afiya 2017

⁵⁵ Nainggolan 2015

⁵⁶ Pratiwi et al. 2021

⁵⁷ Laksmana 2019

at the East Asia Summit in Myanmar in 2014. Minister Susi also attended numerous global forums to advocate for Indonesia's maritime agenda. Indonesia further contributed to environmental diplomacy by campaigning against marine plastic pollution, a move that gained positive traction among global environmental groups.

Taken together, the GMF constituted not merely a sectoral policy but a new international role conception for Indonesia, positioning the country as a maritime middle power with both regional leadership aspirations and a global strategic identity.

Although the GMF was a flagship policy during Widodo's first term, it almost disappeared from the government agenda in his second term (2019–2024). To understand this development, it is instructive to compare GMF's sustainability with that of the BDF, which maintained relevance across administrations.

Unlike the BDF, which was formulated through close collaboration between the president and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the GMF was initially conceived by a small group of Widodo's advisors.⁵⁸ It was more of a campaign narrative than a thoroughly institutionalized policy.

The GMF was promoted outside the established bureaucratic structures, primarily through the Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment, not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, although some career diplomats were involved. The leading figures, such as Arif Havas Oegroseno and Rizal Sukma, were eventually assigned ambassadorial roles, which weakened domestic advocacy for the GMF and maritime diplomacy. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led by then-Minister Retno Marsudi, declared readiness to promote Indonesia as a maritime axis diplomatically but lacked ownership of GMF's core programs.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Nainggolan 2015

⁵⁹ Humas Kemenlu 2015

GMF also suffered from bureaucratic fragmentation and poor inter-agency coordination, especially among Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment, the Ministry of Transportation, and the Indonesian Navy.⁶⁰ This led to overlapping responsibilities and limited bureaucratic ownership. Moreover, GMF did not have a dedicated permanent institutional body to ensure continuity, unlike the BDF, which was embedded in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' organizational structure.

Compared to the BDF, which enjoyed broad elite support and was institutionalized within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the GMF was a more contested and fragmented project from the outset. Divergent interpretations of the GMF's purpose existed among cabinet members and elites, with some emphasizing economic interests and others long-term marine governance, complicating unified policy direction.⁶¹

Furthermore, Indonesia's middle-power ambitions through GMF suffer from limited financial and institutional resources⁶², especially when compared with other middle powers such as China and its Belt and Road Initiative, which commands significant state-backed resources and a clear grand strategy. Without large-scale funding and coherent outreach mechanisms, Indonesia's GMF struggled to translate conceptual ambition into sustained geopolitical influence.

There was no single, unified interpretation of the GMF among the Jokowi cabinet and political elites. For example, then-Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Susi Pudjiastuti focused strongly on sustainably managing fisheries and combating illegal fishing, pursuing a long-term vision of maritime resource protection and governance reform.⁶³ This included the controversial policy of sinking illegal fishing vessels, which garnered international praise but domestic pushback.

⁶⁰ Agastia 2017

⁶¹ Marzuki and Priamarizki 2016

⁶² Caroline 2021

⁶³ J. Nugroho 2018

Additionally, the international dimension complicated the GMF's implementation. Neighboring countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia sent diplomatic notes questioning Indonesia's aggressive anti-illegal fishing policies.⁶⁴ China, in particular, exerted strong pressure, including covert threats to halt investment if Indonesia persisted in sinking Chinese vessels.⁶⁵ These external pressures influenced domestic policymakers to adopt a more cautious stance, further diluting GMF's momentum.

As the Widodo administration progressed, political elites increasingly prioritized short-term economic infrastructure development and domestic stability over the broader maritime vision. Then-Vice President Jusuf Kalla and then-Coordinating Minister Luhut Binsar Panjaitan reportedly urged Pudjiastuti to halt the sinking policy and focus on export fish production, reflecting a pragmatic shift toward economic pragmatism.⁶⁶

Certain industry stakeholders and local elites opposed these policies, arguing that they undermined economic activities and caused job losses, as seen in areas such as Bitung, North Sulawesi.⁶⁷ Some business actors connected to both legal and illegal fishing awaited opportunities to resume activities, with resistance coming from key business actors affected by the moratorium on fishing licenses. Entrepreneurs whose businesses were stalled by the halt in license issuance mobilized to voice their grievances, creating tensions between environmental enforcement and economic interests.⁶⁸

These entrepreneurs directly appealed to Kalla, urging intervention to alleviate the economic disruptions caused by the moratorium. In March 2015, Kalla formally requested Pudjiastuti to immediately evaluate the

⁶⁴ Nainggolan 2015

⁶⁵ Nainggolan 2015

⁶⁶ Rusdi 2018

⁶⁷ Nurhayat, Azizah, and Sukmawijaya 2018; Pangemanan, Mantjoro, and Jusuf 2014

⁶⁸ Rusdi 2018

moratorium on ex-foreign fishing vessels and also reconsider the ban on cargo transshipment at sea.⁶⁹ Kalla underscored the dire economic consequences, citing an 85% drop in fish processing industry capacity and widespread unemployment in fish processing units (Nadlir 2018). His appeal sought a compromise policy that would protect both economic interests and corporate stakeholders, signaling clear elite pressure against Pudjiastuti's stringent maritime enforcement.

The non-reappointment of Pudjiastuti in Widodo's second term cabinet symbolized the diminished political priority of the GMF within the administration. This cabinet change indicated a tilt in Widodo's policy calculus, privileging short- to medium-term economic interests over Pudjiastuti's longer-term vision of sustainable marine governance and maritime sovereignty.⁷⁰ The GMF narrative largely disappeared from official speeches and strategic documents, reflecting its marginalization.

From the NRC perspective, this decline illustrates an internal contestation and role differentiation within Indonesia's elite. Despite the GMF's external plausibility as a middle-power maritime strategy, it failed to secure broad internal legitimacy, especially among economic and political elites focused on land-based development and immediate economic gains.⁷¹ The GMF's decline exemplifies how middle-power strategies require sustained domestic coalition-building and strategic communication; without these, even well-conceived international roles are vulnerable to reversal.

Beyond elite politics, GMF confronted a broader socio-political and historical context that explains the deep challenges to fully realizing Indonesia's maritime ambitions. The dominant political and cultural

⁶⁹ Artharini 2016

⁷⁰ Safitri and Setiawan 2019

⁷¹ Hidayat 2020

paradigm in Indonesia remains heavily land-centric, with the sea historically marginalized as a locus of economic and political activity.⁷²

This land-centered orientation traces back centuries, possibly reinforced during the colonial era. Indonesia's pre-colonial maritime kingdoms, which viewed the sea as central to trade and social relations, were systematically weakened under Dutch colonialism.⁷³ The colonial administration prioritized land-based economic activities such as agriculture, imposing a paradigm shift that reoriented social and economic life inland.(Sulistiyono and Rochwulaningsih 2013).

As a result, the conceptual and institutional prioritization of the sea remains nascent in Indonesian politics and society. This entrenched land bias creates a significant barrier to embedding maritime issues in the national agenda and fully implementing the GMF vision.

The decline of the GMF during Widodo's second term can be attributed to a lack of elite consensus and institutional embedding, conflicting policy priorities within the government, and persistent land-based political orientations. Unlike the BDF, which was rooted in a broad consensus and institutional structure, the GMF remained a loosely coordinated initiative vulnerable to political shifts. This explains why the initial enthusiasm surrounding Indonesia's maritime axis vision failed to sustain itself beyond the early years of Widodo's presidency. While the idea of Indonesia as a global maritime fulcrum remains attractive externally several big countries such as U.S., Japan, India, and Australia it has yet to overcome domestic political economy realities and historical legacies that favour land-centric development and short-term economic priorities.⁷⁴

Consequently, by Widodo's second term, the GMF label disappeared from strategic documents and speeches, with maritime programs either renamed or absorbed into broader infrastructure and economic agendas,

⁷² Trihartono, Hara, and Iqbal 2019

⁷³ Sulistiyono and Rochwulaningsih 2013

⁷⁴ W. Nugroho 2018; Parameswaran 2020

reflecting the fragility of a policy without deep institutionalization or domestic consensus.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper has examined the continuities and discontinuities of subsidiary national roles in Indonesia's foreign policy as a middle power. By analysing the two distinct cases of the BDF and the GMF, the study demonstrates how subsidiary roles can follow divergent trajectories despite aligning with the same overarching principal role: Indonesia's aspiration to be a regional leader.

The continuity of the BDF suggests that subsidiary roles are more likely to endure when they are institutionalized, internally legitimized, and externally recognized. Its success can be attributed to its embedding within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs bureaucracy, consistent elite support, and alignment with Indonesia's self-conception as a normative leader in Asia. In contrast, although initially ambitious and symbolically potent, the GMF lacked adequate domestic anchoring and was vulnerable to role contestation, bureaucratic fragmentation, and shifting political priorities. Consequently, this role was gradually deprioritized and eventually disappeared from Indonesia's foreign policy discourse.

Theoretically, this paper contributes to the NRC literature by demonstrating that subsidiary roles are not merely derivative or secondary to principal roles; rather, subsidiary roles require active domestic reproduction, institutional coherence, and political coalition-building to ensure longevity. In the context of middle powers with limited material resources, the sustainability of foreign policy roles depends on normative credibility and internal policy coherence, not merely on international expectations.

From a policy perspective, these findings underscore the importance of bureaucratic continuity, inter-agency coordination, and sustained

strategic communication in maintaining foreign policy initiatives. For Indonesia to consistently play a leadership role in the region, its subsidiary roles must not only resonate externally but also enjoy stable support throughout domestic political cycles.

More broadly, this analysis highlights how middle powers must navigate the complex balance between responding to systemic incentives and consolidating domestic consensus in shaping their international identities. Future research should therefore pay greater attention to internal determinants of foreign policy roles, including leadership preferences, elite discourse, and institutional dynamics.

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