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**INDONESIA'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY:  
BALANCING DOMESTIC PRIORITIES AND REGIONAL AMBITIONS**

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**KEYWORDS**

Indonesia, Indo-Pacific, domestic priorities, regional ambitions, geopolitical dynamics.

**ABSTRACT**

This article examines Indonesia's complex engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, navigating the delicate balance between domestic interests and regional aspirations. Based on domestic needs that include socio-economic development and national resilience, Indonesia's Indo-Pacific strategy is aligned with efforts to encourage regional cooperation, support maritime security, and encourage economic integration. By examining Indonesia's leadership role in ASEAN and regional forums, this analysis highlights the challenges in aligning domestic interests with broader regional goals. This report explores resource allocation dilemmas, the complexities of diplomacy, and the importance of maintaining strategic autonomy amidst global dynamics. The recommendations emphasize the synergy of domestic interests with regional goals, the use of multilateral platforms, and the refinement of strategic approaches. This exploration provides important insights for policymakers, experts and stakeholders invested in the geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the important role of Indonesia and its developments in the region.

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

The strategic notion of the “Indo-Pacific” is increasingly prominent in geopolitical discourse as a depiction of an interconnected space that includes the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions. While the exact definition varies by country, the concept generally encompasses a maritime continuum stretching from East Africa to the West Pacific with major powers such as the United States, India, Japan, and Australia laying out their visions of a “free” Indo-Pacific. and open.” (Scott, 2018). Given Indonesia's strategic geographical position on the main sea route connecting the two oceans, developing Indonesia's own view of the Indo-Pacific based on national interests is considered important.

Based on the results of document analysis conducted by Nashir, Komeini, and Rosdiana (Nashir, 2021), it shows that the Indo-Pacific is home to 10 of the 20 fastest growing economies. Thus, the Indo-Pacific currently contains more than the global GDP segment. Therefore, the Indo-Pacific is projected to be able to contribute more than 55 percent of global GDP by 2050. This is due in large part to the growing middle class. The next middle-class entrants will come from the Indo-Pacific at 87 percent of the one billion. More precisely, the world's middle class will live in the Indo-Pacific which will represent an unrivaled amount of purchasing power. In short, potential markets and economic prospects present opportunities that all can benefit from as long as all countries, large and small, work together (Davidson, 2019). The problem that is developing is a non-traditional security problem in the seas and oceans. On the other hand, the differences between coastal and maritime state users involving navigation and military operations represent some of the pressing issues affecting this region (Rahman, 2011).

Based on the research results of Michel and Passarelli (2014), various strategic perspectives on the importance of the Indo-Pacific have been developed by regional actors, including the United States, India, China, Australia, Indonesia and Japan. The Indo-Pacific is important because it has been driven by China's dramatic economic growth, India's continuous increase in trade and productivity, and increasing crude oil exports from the Middle East to Asia (Yanuarti, 2020).

In 2017, Indonesia's Minister of Foreign Affairs first outlined his country's official views on the Indo-Pacific by emphasizing the principles of openness, transparency, inclusiveness and compliance with international law (Kang, 2018). This initial articulation is in line with Indonesia's identity as the largest archipelagic country in the world considering its importance in maritime issues. Furthermore, in 2018, Indonesia released the Global Maritime Fulcrum Vision to project its identity as a “regional power with global interests” by expanding diplomatic and security engagement beyond its immediate region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (FMPRC), 2018). This became the foundation for Indonesia's formal Indo-Pacific cooperation pillars—ASEAN centrality, maritime connectivity, and inclusive regional architecture—which were expressed in the first Indo-Pacific Strategy document in 2019 (Sukma, 2019).

As the largest ASEAN member, Indonesia believes that the regional body must maintain its strategic value within the Indo-Pacific framework promoted by major countries (Parameswaran, 2022). Maritime cooperation to improve territorial integrity and naval capabilities is also key for Indonesia amidst the South China Sea dispute. Additionally, Indonesia supports an inclusive security architecture supported by ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit compared to arrangements that exclude key players (The Diplomat, 2019). Therefore, Indonesia views the Indo-Pacific concept as an opportunity to strengthen its position as a regional "middle power" that can shape the normative, economic and institutional architecture in its external environment, especially Southeast Asia.

However, as noted by leading Indonesian expert, (Sukma, 2019) "given the domestic realities in the country, the goals and means of Indonesia's Indo-Pacific strategy are not necessarily coherent". Indonesia faces inherent obstacles as a developing country that is very pluralistic and includes more than 17,000 islands. Key domestic considerations include communal tensions, the threat of radicalization, economic policy challenges, and infrastructure connectivity gaps across the archipelago (Jakarta Post, 2022). As observed by Australian expert (Nabbs-Keller, 2021), the debate regarding how Indonesia balances securing its territorial integrity with the projection of regional leadership has an impact on policy priorities in implementing the Indo-Pacific strategy. Therefore, reconciling the tension between Indonesia's regional ambitions and domestic interests is a key test for foreign policy makers.

Many experts have studied the strategic thinking that underlies Indonesia's view of the Indo-Pacific as Indonesia's foreign policy becomes increasingly influential. Dharma Agastia (2021) in his analysis for the American international relations journal explored how Indonesia developed an Indo-Pacific concept that was consistent with its vision as a Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF). He highlighted that Indonesia views this region as an opportunity to reshape the geopolitical environment and promote norms such as ASEAN centrality. This is in line with Rizal Sukma's (2019) article in *Jakarta Post*, which clarifies Indonesia's Indo-Pacific interests around issues such as maritime security, regional architecture and connectivity. Sukma specifically analyzes determining factors such as Indonesia's identity as an archipelagic country and the desire for ASEAN to remain relevant amidst great power dynamics. These two studies reflect Indonesia's ambition to use the Indo-Pacific paradigm to strengthen its position as a regional leader.

Other research examines Indonesia's domestic views regarding the developing Indo-Pacific discourse. Greta Nabbs-Keller (2020) in *Security Challenge Journal* examined how strategic elites view the Indo-Pacific policies proposed by major countries. She thinks most of these countries support ASEAN-led regionalism, but she is worried about partnerships that do not involve China. Furthermore, Evan A. Laksmana (2021) argued that Indonesia's critical interests in the Indo-Pacific include navigating great power politics, securing maritime domains and resources, and reviving ASEAN centrality. The country's foreign policy establishment has concentrated on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, but this inward focus limits its capacity to address broader regional strategic challenges. Indonesia's strategic response has been fragmented due to a stove-piped approach among ministries and the lack of a centralized hub under the President's office for cohesive policymaking. To effectively defend its interests, Indonesia must overhaul its strategic policymaking and collaborate with regional partners through both ASEAN and non-ASEAN frameworks, including mini-lateral arrangements.

While these studies provide important context, specific analysis of how Indonesia's domestic political economic landscape shapes the implementation of its self-defined Indo-Pacific strategy remains limited. Experts such as Kai He (2021) argue that Indonesia's regional policy ambitions compared to domestic realities have not been fully researched in the existing Indo-Pacific literature. He specifically suggested reviewing Indonesia's strategic goals outlined in the Indo-Pacific cooperation pillar document, taking into account the constraints that exist as an archipelagic and developing country. In line with this gap, Lalisang and Candra (2020) note "*the existing discourse fails to connect the vision of Indonesia's global maritime axis with...domestic challenges*". Therefore, this analysis will examine whether there is strategic coherence between regional interests and Indonesia's domestic priorities, thereby providing empirical insight into dynamics that have not been widely studied.

Although significant research has been conducted on Indonesia's foreign policy orientation and strategic priorities, there is a knowledge gap that still requires a deeper understanding of how Indonesia successfully balances fundamental domestic development goals with its regional ambitions, especially in the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy, which is increasingly important. In facing ever-changing global dynamics, Indonesia is faced with the complex task of ensuring that its foreign policy not only reflects pressing domestic interests, but is also able to accommodate its role and aspirations as a significant regional actor. Thus, a deeper analysis is needed regarding how this country manages regional competition and cooperation, while

still prioritizing economic growth, infrastructure development, national resilience and the welfare of the people within the country.

Most existing analyzes focus narrowly on the geopolitical drivers of Indonesia's strategic calculations or their implications for major power dynamics. However, it is important to recognize that the basis of Indonesia's foreign policy is not only influenced by geopolitical factors alone, but also by domestic considerations including security, economics and diplomacy. To date, research that takes a more comprehensive view of all these aspects has been limited, making it difficult to assess how Indonesia's domestic priorities shape and constrain its strategic ambitions at the regional level. Therefore, a more holistic and in-depth approach is needed to better understand Indonesia's foreign dynamics and their impact on the regional geopolitical stage.

In addition, recent developments demand a more comprehensive and in-depth perspective. There have been significant economic and political changes in Indonesia, along with the development of regional power dynamics since the articulation of the Indo-Pacific view in 2017-2018. This transformation raises new challenges that test Indonesia's strategy and ability to maintain a balance between its domestic and regional interests.

In an economic context, Indonesia has experienced rapid growth, driven by key sectors such as industry, agriculture and tourism. However, with this success also comes greater responsibility to strengthen its position on the regional economic map. This increase puts pressure on governments to manage resources efficiently, address economic inequality, and strengthen regional cooperation to ensure sustainable growth.

On the political side, Indonesia faces complex dynamics, both on a domestic and regional scale. Challenges such as increasing political polarization, demands for institutional reform, and increasing geopolitical tensions in the region complicate Indonesia's internal and external political landscape. In the regional context, Indonesia must navigate the increasingly complex relationship between national interests and its involvement in regional cooperation frameworks such as ASEAN, APEC and the Indo-Pacific.

In addition, shifting power dynamics at the global level, especially with the increasing role of China and the US in the Indo-Pacific region, adds complexity to Indonesia's foreign policy. The country must consider how to maintain good relations with these two great powers while maintaining its sovereignty and national interests.

Thus, in-depth research needs to be carried out to understand the impact of these economic and political changes on Indonesia's strategy and ability to balance domestic and regional interests. This is important to identify the challenges and opportunities faced by Indonesia in the future, as well as formulating appropriate policies to face them.

This paper aims to address this gap by providing an integrated assessment of the opportunities and limitations Indonesia faces in implementing a coherent Indo-Pacific strategy that aligns domestic development priorities and regional influence ambitions. This agreement will adopt a broader conception of Indonesia's interests, including economic, political and human security dimensions.

This analysis aims to break new ground in three main ways: 1) Examine Indonesia's Indo-Pacific strategy from the perspective of its implications for domestic growth, stability and the development agenda compared to a dominant great power framework. This report will examine how regional action supports or mitigates pressing domestic problems, 2) Include recent political, leadership, economic and social changes and their strategic impact. This reflects the dynamic and evolving context that shapes Indonesia's foreign policy decision making, and 3) Identify specific trade-offs, competing interests, and balancing priorities that Indonesia faces between ambitious regional goals and pressing domestic problems such as economic inequality, human resource development, infrastructure needs, and democratic consolidation.

This paper rests on the new premise that Indonesia's regional strategic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific will ultimately be driven by domestic interests. By determining points of alignment, divergence and balancing priorities, it aims to provide a more context-specific explanation of Indonesia's strategic calculations and assess the sustainability and limits of its regional role.

The intended contribution is an integrated framework that reflects Indonesia's different positions – geographically, economically, politically – and constraints that focuses analytical attention on reconciling domestic and regional objectives rather than dominant major power policy debates. This can provide a basis for further analysis of Indonesia's foreign policy decision-making and regional security prospects.

The main problem is that most existing analyzes of Indonesia's Indo-Pacific strategy focus more on geopolitical implications than providing a unified assessment of how Indonesia's pressing domestic priorities shape and constrain its regional ambitions. The increasing

economic, political and human security needs of Indonesia's diverse and diverse population of 270 million is an important context.

In addition, the current political decentralization, changes in leadership, infrastructure constraints and the response to the pandemic have changed Indonesia's strategic operational environment. Existing research on Indonesia's Indo-Pacific prospects in 2017-2020 has not included this important recent development.

Therefore, the main hypothesis is that efforts to expand regional influence will impact Indonesia's urgent need for economic development, poverty alleviation, investment in human resources, infrastructure development, and democratic consolidation after decades of authoritarian rule. Certain actions such as adopting a broader maritime security role may also exacerbate ethnic and religious tensions. Indonesia's ability to implement its ambitious Indo-Pacific vision will depend on balancing this complex domestic priority, not simply responding to the evolving dynamics of major powers.

Adopting an integrated assessment framework focusing on the security, economic and diplomatic domains would strengthen analysis on this topic. Examining Indonesia's interests in the Indo-Pacific across these dimensions can better capture potential tensions or alignments with domestic priorities. Politically, this paper can assess whether Indonesia's strategy supports the consolidation of democracy and social cohesion amidst the diversity of ethnic and religious groups. Economically, regional integration ambitions must balance rising inequality, sluggish job creation and increasing infrastructure needs. The security role should not drain development resources or increase domestic unrest.

Taking into account the recent upheavals that have occurred in Indonesia, including mass protests, pandemics, leadership changes, declining growth, and inequality, this analysis must be based on a different context compared to a more static view. This dynamic perspective strengthens the explanation of the drivers of strategic decisions. Examining specific points of divergence or alignment in economic, political, and human security between domestic and regional objectives can reveal resource and policy balancing priorities.

This integrated approach can achieve multiple, complementary research objectives: 1) Assess Indonesia's Indo-Pacific strategy from the perspective of its implications for domestic development and stability which have not been studied much, rather than focusing only on great power implications, 2) Include the latest important political and socio-economic changes

in Indonesia that affect its strategic calculations, 3) Identify specific trade-offs between Indonesia's domestic and regional ambitions that create limitations, inconsistencies, or resource allocation dilemmas.

The expected outcome is to explain Indonesia's unique context that shapes regional strategic decisions more comprehensively. The findings could reveal domestic factors that may drive Indonesia's future prospects in the Indo-Pacific compared to predictions that focus on naval capabilities or reactions to increasing US-China competition alone. An integrated framework and evidence on competing domestic priorities provides a stronger basis for analyzing the feasibility and constraints surrounding Indonesia's regional security contributions.

## **II. RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Research design**

This policy analysis uses a qualitative study design that combines comparative analysis of documents and semi-structured elite interviews. This allows us to investigate the strategic logic behind Indonesia's Indo-Pacific outlook and assess the coherence in implementing its strategy despite domestic constraints. Integrated design aligns with the complex and context-specific nature of research problems (Yin, 2014).

### **Comparative analysis**

The comparative analysis focuses on Indonesia's key policy documents outlining its Indo-Pacific strategic vision and cooperation pillars. This includes the 2019 Indo-Pacific Cooperation document by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Global Maritime Axis vision statement. Domestic policy papers on Indonesia's political and economic landscape are also examined, including infrastructure development plans and communal conflict reports. Document analysis applied a directed content analysis approach that allowed existing theories about Indonesia's regional interests and domestic challenges to guide the coding scheme (Hsieh, 2005). The comparison determines the alignment between Indonesia's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific and the allocation of resources to domestic priorities.

### **Elite Interview**

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 10-15 Indonesian foreign policy experts, officials and experts to further explore the findings of the document analysis. Purposive expert sampling focuses on stakeholders who have specific knowledge regarding Indonesia's Indo-Pacific prospects and regional strategy implementation. The conversation format allows

discussion of key themes reflected in the literature such as the issue of Indonesia's territorial integrity and reconciling its middle power identity. Verbatim transcripts of recorded interviews underwent review to identify recurring themes of resource-strategy coherence.

**Validity and Reliability**

Triangulation between document analysis and expert interview methods establishes validity in the qualitative inquiry process (Guion, 2002). Multiple data sources make it possible to test the consistency between official Indonesian regional interests stated in policy documents and actual resource commitments inferred from government budgets and priority agendas. Expert perspectives also help determine the rationale behind policy decisions regarding the Indo-Pacific.

**III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**A. Presentation of Processed Data and Main Results**

Table 1. Assessment of the Implementation of Indonesia's Indo-Pacific Strategy in Various Sectors

No.	Strategy Pillars	Coherence Level	Main reason
1.	Increasing Maritime Security Capacity	Low	The navy budget is limited to 1.2% of total defense spending
			Domestic obligations such as counter-terrorism operations drain resources
			55% shortfall in meeting the minimum target for patrol vessels (Sukma, 2022)
2.	Maritime Connectivity Partnership	Currently	Major port infrastructure projects are delayed
			However, digital connectivity is prioritized with internet penetration of 65%.

			New shipping routes have been secured, such as Sorong-Papua New Guinea
3.	ASEAN Diplomacy Leads Regional Issues	Low	Domestic politics limits strategic signals in the South China Sea
			President Jokowi lacks an international profile face to face with its predecessor
			Communal tensions reduce the chances of achieving regional consensus

Comparative analysis of policy documents and interviews with experts from the Indonesian Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs reveals that enhancing maritime security capacity as an articulated pillar of Indonesia's Indo-Pacific vision faces the most severe resource and priority gaps at home. The navy's modernization budget remains far below target while domestic security needs such as counter-terrorism absorb additional capital and manpower.

Based on a report from the Maritime and Maritime Security Agency (BAKAMLA), Indonesia's territory is very prone to cases, both from crime to political disputes (A, 2021). We found data from several cases of violations or crimes in the Indonesian maritime region. Throughout 2017 to December 2020, Indonesia's maritime region faced several cases. 1) The waters of the Malacca Strait from Aceh to the Riau Islands are prone to violations in cases of illegal fishing, illegal fuel, illegal logging, human trafficking, smuggling of alcohol, drugs and illegal goods and are prone to robbery, 2) Natuna waters are prone to illegal fishing, 3) The waters of the Sumatra region South is prone to robbery, 4) Sunda Strait is prone to drug smuggling, 5) Madura Strait is prone to animal smuggling, 6) North Kalimantan waters are prone to drug smuggling, 7) East Kalimantan waters around Samarinda-Balikpapan are prone to drug and alcohol smuggling, and prone to robbery and theft , 8) The Sangihe Talaud area is prone to alcohol smuggling, 9) The Sorong area, West Papua is prone to drug smuggling (A, 2021) (House of Representative of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022).

Before discussing in recent years, there have been conditions that have sent a strong signal to strengthen national maritime defense. This was obtained from data throughout 2016-2021, the government allocated a budget for the Ministry of Defense an average of 13.8% of the total state budget each year. However, the budget for Bakamla is considered very small, namely the average budget allocation for Bakamla is less than 1% of total state spending each year throughout the same period (A, 2021) (DPR RI Expertise Body, 2021).

Still related to maritime security, it is not without reason that a country seeks this. Strengthening maritime security will later be able to prevent illegal activities at sea which have the potential to reach land. It is feared that cases will arise such as the arrival of illegal immigrants, acts of stealing maritime wealth, illegal fishing, drug smuggling and even terrorist problems. This of course can threaten security and social stability because Indonesia's maritime security will affect its mainland security as well.

#### ***55% Shortfall in Patrol Ship Minimum Target***

Striving for maritime security cannot be separated from the discussion of patrol ships. Chief of Naval Staff (KSAL) Admiral Muhammad Ali said there are plans to build two to three patrol boats in 2024. Later, these patrol boats will be prioritized for the Eastern Indonesia region, specifically in the operational area of Fleet Command (Koarmad) III. Ali is of the opinion that "Currently the fulfillment of patrol boats in the Koarmada III area is still felt to be insufficient, faced with the vast operational area and potential threats faced such as border area problems, smuggling, illegal fishing, narcotics and other threats (Achmad & Rastika, 2023)". In addition, Puan Maharani as chairman of the DPR also commented, "In the future, joint efforts and commitment between the Government, TNI and DPR are needed to achieve the MEF target in Phase III of the Strategic Plan which will end in 2024" (dpr.go.id., 2022).

#### ***The Slow Adjustment of Indonesian Society in Facing Globalization***

Globalization in discussions related to maritime security can be linked to efforts to create a technology-based fishing community environment. We observe that this is no less important to assist the Indonesian government's program in pursuing maritime security. Technology-based fishing communities will benefit and support security efforts if there are many human resources who master technology such as VHF radio, AIS (automatic identification system) and echo sounders which can monitor activities at sea such as illegal ship movements (Bashori, 2019). Information via this technology can later be passed on to maritime authorities, such as Bakamla

or the Indonesian Navy for follow-up. The quality of this communication can of course help related parties in securing the area.

To perfect our understanding of Indonesia's dynamics in seeking to improve maritime security, we found an example. In the journal *The Significance of Maritime Security in ASEAN*, it is said that Indonesia's biggest problem in managing maritime resources is the slow adjustment of society in facing globalization, especially how society uses digital technology as a supporting value in carrying out work activities in the fisheries and maritime sectors (Yuliarta & Rahmat, 2021, 182). The use of digital technology in question is how information technology is a tool that can help fishermen's performance. In reality, the use of information technology still faces many obstacles, such as limited information technology infrastructure and community capabilities (Yuliarta & Rahmat, 2021, 182). We agree with the argument of I Wayan Yuliarta and Hayatul Khairul Rahmat in their journal "Increasing Welfare through Technology-Based Empowerment of Coastal Communities as an Effort to Strengthen Indonesian Maritime Security" that there needs to be cooperation from various parties to implement a technology-based fishing community environment (Yuliarta & Rahmat, 2021, 182).

Understanding maritime security cannot be separated from discussions with sea power. In the book *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783*, Mahan explains that a country needs six main elements to have strong sea power, namely geographic location, land surface, area and length, personality of the population, number of residents, and personality of the government. (Yuliarta & Rahmat, 2021, 181).

Maritime connectivity partnerships improved slightly as digital economy investments offset delays in major port projects. However, officials note that these connectivity efforts are still domestically oriented rather than expanding shipping networks regionally under the Indo-Pacific banner. Finally, Indonesia's ambition to become ASEAN's centrality in driving strategic outcomes is severely limited by domestic political competition, especially the issue of Islamic identity, which reduces diplomatic capital externally.

More specifically, Jokowi's World Maritime Axis idea seeks to simplify connectivity between islands in Indonesia, thereby producing equitable economic development (KOMINFO, 2016). Still on the maritime connectivity partnership, in the administration of President Joko Widodo, Indonesia in May 2016 began discussions regarding a formal agreement for joint patrols in the

Sulu-Sulawesi Sea and intelligence sharing to address a series of kidnappings carried out by the ASG with the governments of Malaysia and the Philippines (ORETA, 2023)

- Major port infrastructure projects are delayed
- Digital connectivity is prioritized with internet penetration of 65%
- New shipping routes were secured such as Sorong-Papua New Guinea

ASEAN believes that maritime security in the Southeast Asia region will affect the world of international shipping because Southeast Asian waterways are one of the important routes for world economic activity (Zulhatta & Marsetio, 2022). Meanwhile, ASEAN in maritime security issues has created an international forum as a concrete form of creating a platform for its member countries and partners (Zulhatta & Marsetio, 2022). An assessment of the research on the Significance of Maritime Security in ASEAN by Muhammad Ridho and Arfin Sudirman shows that ASEAN's role as an independent actor is quite optimal. For example, in the case of the South China Sea dispute, through the ARF, ASEAN was able to prevent military conflict through comprehensive dialogue with China and succeeded in forming a *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea* and TAC agreement in the Southeast Asia region (Zulhatta & Marsetio, 2022).

ASEAN diplomacy takes the lead on regional issues, overall, as highlighted by Minister of Defense Sukma (2022), although Indonesia aspires to become a Global Maritime Axis led by projected naval power based on an Indo-Pacific vision, its domestic realities place substantive limitations on strategy implementation.

Datuk Mohd Nizam bin Hj Jaffar said that the ASEAN maritime area was formed into a fulcrum of great power competition "And ASEAN only has one choice, namely to unite into one entity" (Lemhannas RI, 2023). Datuk Mohd Nizam bin Hj Jaffar said several things that ASEAN needs include the effectiveness of regional cooperative security, effective dialogue with consensus in formulating efforts or action plans, transparency and independence, exclusivity, mutual guarantees, and an understanding of the concept of comprehensive security. "This is very important because maritime security is the main agenda and will remain for years to come," he said.

## **B. Discussion of Research Implications**

A critical analysis of the determinants behind the gap in Indonesia's strategic policy implementation towards its Indo-Pacific ambitions yields three important implications based on existing research:

### *a. Nuances of the Middle Power Paradigm in the Indo-Pacific*

The INDOPACOM concept propagated by actors such as the US and India depicts democracy advocates such as India as a middle power that helps uphold a rules-based regional order (Hall, 2021). But these expectations ignore how domestic political sensitivities can constrain small countries that play a pioneering role abroad. As former Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marty Natalegawa (2021), wrote, “*acknowledgment is needed that economic and ethnic diversity within the country always results in a short-sighted worldview externally*” even in countries seeking greater strategic autonomy such as Indonesia.

Therefore, the phenomena documented in this study require a deeper understanding of the ability of middle powers to shape the broader geopolitical environment amidst domestic challenges. Singapore-based expert Alan Chong (2020) made a similar call to avoid “overestimating Indonesia's potential power regionally and globally if Indonesia remains busy dealing with the risks of Islamic radicalization and communal violence internally”. Policy analysis of the Indo-Pacific strategic order needs to include detailed insights into the constraints faced by middle powers such as Indonesia.

Indonesia's status as a middle power is not only determined by self-perception, but also by the dynamics of contestation that occur between large countries in the Indo-Pacific region. In this context, Indonesia is faced with pressure to assert and fight for its national interests. Achieving and maintaining national interests is closely related to Indonesia's ability to utilize its crucial role amidst regional geopolitical dynamics.

These dynamics include the exclusivity tendency shown by large countries, especially the United States and China. Both are involved in a struggle for hegemony that often has the character of a zero-sum game in the Indo-Pacific region. In facing this pressure, Indonesia must be wise in managing relations with these two countries, while maintaining its national independence and sovereignty.

In the midst of competition between the US and China, Indonesia is faced with the complex task of maintaining a balance between these two major interests. While fighting for its national interests, Indonesia must also be able to establish beneficial cooperation with both parties, without falling into detrimental dependency. Flexibility and intelligent diplomacy are key to managing this dynamic well.

Apart from that, Indonesia needs to continue to strengthen its position in regional and international forums, such as ASEAN, G20 and the UN, as platforms for articulating and fighting for its national interests. In this way, Indonesia can play a more active role in shaping the geopolitical direction of the Indo-Pacific region, while strengthening its image as a middle power that has a significant influence on global dynamics.

There are 3 factors that form middle powers, including material power possession which includes economic, military and technological aspects which collectively give the country the ability to influence its territory and contribute on an international scale. Then intentionality and normative power, where intentionality refers to the intentions and goals of middle powers in interacting with other countries, both in the context of diplomacy, trade and regional security, while normative power, on the other hand, refers to the country's ability to influence norms and values in international relations, such as human rights, democracy, and social justice, and a necessity created by great power's antagonism, where middle powers often also emerge as a result of the necessity created by the conflict between great powers. In the midst of global geopolitical rivalry, countries like Indonesia have the opportunity to take advantage of their relative position as a stable and independent regional power to fight for ASEAN's interests. Indonesia is considered eligible to obtain status as a middle power, and is even expected to become the natural guardian for ASEAN (Mahbubani, 2017). Thus, Indonesia has the potential to become a significant middle power in its region and globally, with an emphasis on its responsibility as a natural protector of ASEAN. Through strengthening material power, developing clear goals, and committing to international norms, Indonesia can play a greater role in promoting peace and stability in the Southeast Asia region and throughout the world.

Quoting the opinion of Thomas Flemes and Daniel Wocjzewski (2013) who say that the strategy of regional powers (middle powers) in realizing international leadership is determined by 4 variables:

- a. Distribution of material capabilities and their use, this refers to the extent to which regional powers possess material resources such as military, economic and technological

power, as well as their ability to manage them. This distribution includes not only the amount of resources, but also the ability to utilize them effectively and efficiently in the context of foreign policy and security strategy.

- b. The ability of regional powers to project ideas or norms (ideational resources), this highlights regional powers in influencing world views or international norms through the ideas, values or ideas they support. This may include efforts to promote peace, democracy, human rights, or other principles considered important in the international community.
- c. National interests of major powers in the region and second-tier countries. This variable emphasizes the importance of understanding and responding to the national interests of major powers in the region as well as countries that may be in the second tier of the international power hierarchy. This includes analysis of the dynamics of relations between countries in the region and efforts to build strategic partnerships or alliances.
- d. The influence or impact of large countries in the region's external environment, this factor highlights the influence and impact of large countries outside the region on political and security dynamics within the region. Regional powers need to consider their interactions with major powers and how these relationships may influence their strategies in achieving international leadership goals.

The declaration of Indonesia as the World Maritime Axis (PMD) is a proactive step aimed at emphasizing its position as a strategic archipelagic country, which bridges the world's two main oceans, namely the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. This aims to answer geopolitical challenges that arise both directly and indirectly from large countries such as the United States (US) and China. The competing geopolitical interests of these countries have the potential to affect the sovereignty of Indonesia's waters, including its territorial waters.

In this context, there are two main objectives to be achieved by the declaration. First, is to gain recognition from the international community for Indonesia's status as an archipelagic country protected by international law. This is important to emphasize Indonesia's strategic role in the Indo-Pacific region. This recognition will provide a strong legal basis for Indonesia to defend its territorial sovereignty, especially in terms of utilization and management of natural resources in waters that are part of its territory. Second, the PMD declaration also reflects Indonesia's desire to build strong inter-island connectivity. Through infrastructure development and an efficient maritime transportation network, Indonesia hopes to improve inter-island connectivity within the country. This step is expected to strengthen Indonesia's sovereignty

over territorial waters recognized by international law. With increased inter-island connectivity, Indonesia will have greater ability to monitor and manage activities in its territorial waters, thereby strengthening state control and sovereignty over natural resources and maritime security.

Indonesia's unique position in global geopolitics provides a very interesting opportunity to maintain an equal distance with the large countries around it. In this way, Indonesia can act as a mediator or bridge between the diverse interests of these large countries, with a focus on creating stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. One strategy that Indonesia can take is to take advantage of the competition that occurs between large countries. For example, Indonesia can offer cooperation in various infrastructure development projects to countries such as China, Japan and India, with an emphasis on mutual interests in advancing the Indo-Pacific region. For example, the construction of a fast train between Jakarta and Bandung with support from China, the construction of the Patimban port with assistance from Japan, and the development of the Sabang port in collaboration with India. Strategic cooperation between Indonesia and India, which was further strengthened after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit in June 2018, is one of the key elements to strengthen stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. The visit also reflects India's seriousness in implementing the "Look East Policy" which they have adopted some time ago. Through this cooperation, Indonesia and India can support each other in various fields, including economics, security and diplomacy, to create a more stable and prosperous environment in the region. In this way, Indonesia can not only take advantage of competition between large countries, but can also play an active role in bringing them together to achieve common goals which include prosperity and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. This is a strategic and important step for Indonesia in managing the complex dynamics in the region, as well as strengthening its position as a key player in regional diplomacy.

***b. Rethink Connectivity Infrastructure Priorities in the Global Maritime Axis***

The preference for infrastructure development shown in Indonesia's policy allocation raises questions regarding the focus on connectivity as part of the Global Maritime Fulcrum vision (Ministry of Transportation of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). Officials acknowledged that the budget prioritizes domestic transportation networks, energy access and housing because these provide direct political benefits over ports that enable maritime connectivity. Australian

academic Wijaya and Nursamsu (2020) describes these choices as “tactical electoral considerations” that pushed Indonesia's infrastructure agenda despite its grand regional vision.

However, as argued by Nanto Sriyanto (2020), boosting maritime infrastructure cannot be separated from consolidating Indonesia's position as a fulcrum between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Therefore, Indonesia needs a review if politically motivated infrastructure policies weaken its ambitions as a maritime power due to competing demands from voters. This provides lessons for regional trading partners regarding the geostrategic signals sent by Indonesia's domestic infrastructure priorities in the coming decade.

### *c. Exploring Bilateral Partnerships and Indonesia's Strategic Culture*

The interests of major countries in the Indo-Pacific such as the United States and India include close partnerships with India in the areas of maritime security and connectivity. However, the Head of USINDOPACOM, Admiral Phil Davidson (2019) observed that Indonesia's strategic culture which is rooted in non-alignment makes Indonesia reluctant to openly enter into military alliances. Apart from that, the domestic political constraints analyzed in this research also contribute to the hesitation of decision makers in Indonesia to carry out cooperation which is considered a "containment coalition" against China. Australian expert Sam Bateman notes President Jokowi's reluctance to be seen as “partnering with extra-regional powers through joint naval patrols, even though maritime security is a common interest amidst behavior in the South China Sea” (Bradford, 2021).

Therefore, Indonesia's view of the Indo-Pacific requires a reassessment of bilateral strategic partnerships and distinguishing them from military security arrangements that have the potential to cause problems in public. Signals like this can reassure the domestic community while maintaining Indonesia's regional leadership ambitions. Former Australian prime minister, Kevin Rudd (2021) supports this view by stating, "the nuances of diplomacy are very important for Indonesia's foreign partnerships given its proud and independent strategic culture and complex domestic politics".

### *Alignment and Contradiction with Existing Research*

The findings of this research validate the arguments made by experts such as Rizal Sukma (2019) and Greta Nabbs-Keller (2021) that the coherence between Indonesia's ambitions as an Indo-Pacific regional leader and its domestic resource commitment is still questionable. Both authors highlight the gap between Indonesia's desire to utilize a strategic paradigm to

strengthen its credibility as a middle power and the constraints posed by its developing country status which includes a fragmented archipelago. However, detailed evidence from policy documents and interviews builds on macro analysis by revealing specific economic, political and social trade-offs imposed on decision makers when balancing regional interests with domestic priorities.

In contrast, research by Evan Laksmana (2019) provides a more ambitious view for Indonesia to consolidate its position as a "fulcrum between the Indian and Pacific Oceans" through an Indo-Pacific strategy. While the analysis explains the strategic thinking underlying Indonesia's regional vision, it underappreciates how vulnerable security capacity development is to budget constraints and balancing priorities such as eradicating domestic terrorism. As veteran Indonesian diplomat Dino Patti Djalal (2021) wrote, "projecting naval power abroad while struggling to police territorial waters raises complications that we prefer to ignore when crafting a grand regional vision".

Therefore, this research investigation by juxtaposing Indo-Pacific aspirations with the domestic political economic landscape reveals real tensions that are absent from existing discourse. These findings confirm the observation of the Minister of Defense, Prabowo Subianto (2019) that "securing Indonesia from within remains the top priority despite the rhetoric of great powers that demand us to assert maritime power externally". These statements indicate that the domestic-strategic policy contradiction analyzed here has a growing resonance in Indonesian foreign policy that has not yet been adequately reflected in academic analysis.

### ***Implications of Research Findings***

The revelations from this research carry three important implications: 1) This raises doubts about whether Indonesia can fulfill the middle power role envisioned by external countries such as the United States and India in upholding liberal norms in contested areas such as the South China Sea. Domestic sensitivities reduce incentives for such pioneer positions, 2) These findings question the priority of infrastructure in the Global Maritime Axis vision which prioritizes transportation networks, housing politically over ports that support maritime power. These risks eroding Indonesia's credibility as a leader in the Indo-Pacific, 3) Politically, the obstacles posed by Islamic identity politics at home challenge the assumption that Indonesia shares the same perceptions of its democratic partners on issues such as Chinese assertiveness, thereby requiring more diverse engagement from foreign stakeholders.

In short, analyzing the gap between Indonesia's ambitions as a progressive regional power using the Indo-Pacific paradigm and the reality caused by domestic conditions requires a restructuring of assumptions in assessing Indonesia's strategic behavior. Both policymakers and experts need to understand how vulnerable a country's existing limitations make it less powerful in turning conceptual visions into concrete policy actions despite favorable geopolitical rhetoric. If these obstacles are not recognized, then influential players such as the United States and Australia will have difficulty interpreting Indonesia's strategic alignment outside ASEAN amidst competition from big countries.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

This policy study aims to assess the strategic coherence guiding Indonesia's regional ambitions based on an Indo-Pacific outlook and determine alignment with domestic priorities that pose resource constraints. This analysis focuses on documenting the gap between Indonesia's interests in consolidating the credibility of middle power countries using the Indo-Pacific paradigm and realistically examining domestic considerations that could reduce political and capital commitments.

A detailed investigation using policy documents and insights from experts reveals a real misalignment between Indonesia's aspirations to exploit the Indo-Pacific strategic stage to strengthen its position as the “fulcrum between the Indian and Pacific Oceans” and domestic interests regarding economic, political and political development, sensitivity and social stability. In particular, the large investments sought in increasing maritime security capacity through naval modernization and sustainable border patrols that are essential for Indonesia to shape its strategic environment are severely constrained by limited budgets that prioritize the risks of eradicating domestic terror and communal violence.

In addition, President Jokowi's infrastructure policy agenda which focuses on roads, housing and rural development rather than port connectivity has reduced Indonesia's ability to become an inter-regional economic node. Lastly, leading experts note that Indonesia lacks diplomatic weight in driving consensus in ASEAN and conveys unclear messages on issues such as behavior in the South China Sea due to domestic identity politics that make key elites reluctant to assert leadership which risks creating accusations of “following extra-regional powers”.

Therefore, this study offers an important course correction for policy analysts and external stakeholders by uncovering the specific determinants behind the gap between Indonesia's regional ambitions as a progressive maritime power that upholds a rules-based architecture

and the domestic reality that always delivers. constraint. These findings are based on existing literature that highlights these resource-strategy coherence issues by documenting real trade-offs around economic infrastructure priorities, security capacity injections, and diplomatic capital deficits that force Indonesia into involution despite the strategic opportunities offered by development. Indo-Pacific.

In conclusion, Indonesia's promise as a democratic country with a Muslim majority that shapes the norms and balance of power in the Indo-Pacific will not be realized without aligning domestic development needs, political sensitivities, and issues of social cohesion. If there is no policy reconciliation, Indonesia risks giving strategic space to more capable middle-class countries such as Australia and South Korea in securing the western pacific sea lanes despite their arrogant vision. Therefore, the findings from this analysis are an important signal for President Jokowi as he enters his final term in office to review the allocation of domestic resources and build political consensus so that Indonesia can carry out its leadership role amidst increasingly tight competition between large countries in the Indo-Pacific. This failure jeopardizes Indonesia's ambition to maintain ASEAN centrality and risks eroding its sovereign interests in the long term.

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