

# Indonesia as “Global Maritime Fulcrum”: A Post-Mortem Analysis

AMTI [amti.csis.org/indonesia-as-global-maritime-fulcrum-a-post-mortem-analysis/](https://amti.csis.org/indonesia-as-global-maritime-fulcrum-a-post-mortem-analysis/)

Evan Laksmana

November 8,  
2019



Indonesian president Joko “Jokowi” Widodo first came into office in 2014 promising to turn the country into the “Global Maritime Fulcrum” (GMF)—a force between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Consisting of both domestic and foreign policy elements, many had hoped that the GMF would serve as Indonesia’s first actionable grand strategy in decades.

Jokowi presented the GMF – built on maritime culture, resources, infrastructure, diplomacy, and defense—at the East Asia Summit in November 2014. Three years later, the doctrine was codified and expanded through a Presidential Regulation on National Sea Policy.

Foreign governments have taken the GMF seriously. Chinese officials often try to [link the Belt and Road Initiative](#) with the GMF. Secretary of Defense James Mattis acknowledged Indonesia as the “[maritime fulcrum of the Indo-Pacific area](#)” in his 2018 visit to Jakarta.

But when Jokowi was sworn in for a second and final term a few weeks ago, the GMF disappeared. In his [inauguration speech](#), neither the words “maritime” nor “foreign policy” appeared once. Instead, Jokowi vowed to focus on human capital, infrastructure, regulatory and bureaucratic reforms, and a broader “economic transformation.”

The re-appointed foreign minister Retno Marsudi also recently outlined [her priorities](#) for the next five years: trade and investment, citizen protection, sovereignty, regional and global leadership, and diplomatic infrastructure. While she calls this focus a “4+1” approach, she never once uttered the word “maritime.”

The GMF, for all intents and purposes, appears to have died. The idea might live on among analysts and perhaps a few officials will keep up the bureaucratic platitudes. But the GMF will not be Jokowi’s second-term doctrine, nor will it be Indonesia’s grand strategy for now.

How did we get here?

The GMF was never a well-developed grand strategy to begin with; it was not backed by years of research and conceptual development. Rather, it was merely an excellent campaign platform for Jokowi to distinguish himself in the 2014 elections. Nevertheless, the GMF's logic and philosophy is sound and tailor-made for the world's largest archipelagic state.

Unfortunately, Jokowi was not personally invested in using the GMF as he managed his daily agenda. He focused mostly on development projects, from infrastructure to social welfare, with foreign policy only occasionally coming up as it related to investment or trade. The National Sea Policy was largely a "bureaucratic umbrella" document connecting preexisting programs across ministries; it could not corral them under a single framework.

The naval element never got off the ground because Jokowi left defense policy and civil-military relations on "auto-pilot," letting his advisers—mostly retired army generals—shape policy and expand the military's autonomy. It also took Jokowi three years to select a military commander he could personally trust: Air Chief Marshall Hadi Tjahjanto. As re-election came around, Jokowi and his generals focused more on supporting the military's organizational expansion, from launching new units to opening the door for more officers in civilian ministries, rather than on aligning its activities with any maritime grand strategy.

The foreign policy element of the GMF also languished because Foreign Minister Retno was too "process-oriented," spending time on bureaucratic reform and relying too heavily on existing multilateral platforms like ASEAN. To be fair, she also needed time to build a close rapport with Jokowi while she catered to the diplomatic issues that carried domestic significance (e.g. trade and investment or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict).

Indonesia's geopolitical interests thus took a backseat to idiosyncrasies, bureaucratic inertia, and domestic politics. For example, the foreign ministry could have used the GMF as a baseline to develop a strategy and policies to effectively deal with the South China Sea disputes and Chinese encroachment in Indonesian waters, as well as manage the impact of U.S.-China strategic competition. Instead it passed the buck, spending diplomatic capital only to have ASEAN pass a largely flawed Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

Additionally, the government entities responsible for the maritime sector have remained fractured and "stove-piped". Jokowi elevated the Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) to function as Indonesia's coast guard in late 2014, but he did not fundamentally restructure or streamline the maritime domain governance where more than a dozen agencies and ministries continue to carve out their own space.

The fisheries ministry under Susi Pudjiastuti had sought to fundamentally re-shape how Indonesia fights illegal fishing, sometimes at loggerheads with other agencies and ministries. That she needed a new presidential task force to do so (known as Satgas 115)

epitomizes the bureaucratic infighting surrounding maritime security. The navy also needed to “take turns” and occasionally cooperate with the fisheries ministry, Satgas 115, and Bakamla to patrol Indonesia’s vast waters.

That two different coordinating ministries “share” the maritime domain exacerbated the problem. The Coordinating Ministry for Legal, Security, and Political Affairs was supposed to coordinate the navy and foreign ministry, but the fisheries ministry, though it was now equipped with its own illegal fishing taskforce, remained under the Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs. Jokowi himself faced coordination difficulties, lacking a central strategic policy hub equivalent to a National Security Council. Even the management of his own office continues to be split between the chief of staff, state secretary, and cabinet secretary.

While the GMF was the most conceptually-coherent grand strategy for Indonesia’s archipelagic state, Jokowi squandered it by abandoning the doctrine half-way through his first term. In his second term, Jokowi now appears ready to drop all pretense of institutional reform and instead double down on economic and infrastructure development at the expense of everything else, Indonesia’s geopolitical interests included.

---

*Photo: International Maritime Organization*