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How do we know a successful foreign policy when we see one?

INSIGHT

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Last week, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo marked his second anniversary of being in office. Critics believe that thus far Indonesia has not been adequately addressing foreign policy.

However, Foreign Minister Retno LP Marsudi claimed that Jokowi attended more than 64 bilateral and international meetings last year, the Vice President attended 22 additional bilateral meetings, Deputy Foreign Minister AM Fachir attended 46 meetings and Retno attended 155 meetings.

The President's Chief of Staff claimed that Indonesia has made positive accomplishments in the areas of regional and global leadership, the protection of its citizens and the defense of its sovereignty. Highlights include the successful organization of the 5th Extraordinary Organization of Islamic Conference Summit, UN peacekeeping contributions and the inclusion of over 2 million citizens living overseas to the e-protection database.

There were also six maritime delimitation negotiations, including a special envoy appointed to Malaysia, and 13 talks concerning land borders. Attendance and leadership at the G-7 Outreach Meeting, G-20 Summit and numerous ASEAN meetings were noted, as well.

Skeptics might claim this cannot be deemed as "success" because much of the current state of foreign policy was initiated under the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono administration. It is also unclear why the Jokowi Administration is credited with so many meetings and conferences, but there has yet to be impact on the ground.

How do we know a successful foreign policy when we see one?

Scholarly research, unfortunately, offers a few answers. As David Baldwin noted in the *Annual Review of Political Science*, assessing policy "success" is difficult to do because the concept is slippery, and procedures by which to judge policy can be misleading; it is multidimensional and obvious victories or defeats are few.

Moreover, foreign policy outcomes are often determined by how other countries respond, which cannot be precisely predicted. The process of foreign policy formulation matters, too. For example, did policymakers select goals based on solid evidence and careful reasoning or were they driven by myth, misplaced analogies or bureaucratic procedures?

Additionally, as Stephen Walt wrote in *Foreign Policy*, we should judge a state's foreign policy based on how well they learn and adapt. For example, will the foreign ministry cling to a single position or be able to see alternative policies?

The difficulties, notwithstanding three parameters — stated outcomes, formulation process and adaptability — are useful signposts with which to heed in examining foreign policy success.

How should we conceptualize a successful Indonesian foreign policy then?

First, the number of events or meetings is not a solid measurement of successful foreign policy outcomes. Instead, these meetings should serve larger stated strategic goals.

Obviously, we need to be in the room if we want to be part of any decision-making process. However, these meetings, while necessary, are insufficient to build successful foreign policy. How you leverage those meetings into concrete strategic outcomes is what matters.

Unfortunately, measuring success by meetings may be part of the foreign ministry's "operational code". Its 2015-2019 Strategic Planning document, for instance, is not only plagued with conceptual morass over strategy, goals and policies, but it also used "improvement indicators" based on the number of meetings and to what extent these meetings incorporate our suggestions in their documents.

Perhaps these measures were mandated by the National Planning Agency or the Ministry for Bureaucratic Reform after all, foreign policy is less concrete than poverty. But they should not be taken at face value nor should they substitute stated strategic outcomes.

Second, assuming we have better assessments of the rapidly changing regional environment, Indonesia should be explicitly seeking to achieve high-impact, rather than normative, strategic goals.

These could include, for example, the signing of a legally binding Code of Conduct for the South China Sea by 2019, a public recognition by China that Indonesia, under 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), has full sovereign rights over the Natuna waters or the halting of regional "militarization," including freedom of navigation operations.

Finally, the foreign ministry should not become an "isolated island" devoid of regular, institutionalized interactions with its ministerial and agency counterparts across the government as well as with nongovernmental organizations and research institutions.

Consistent and regular external engagements might minimize any excessive "multilateral groupthink" and place emphasis on international law, which could create "tunnel vision" in how the ministry assesses its policy options.

We might also consider fundamental overhauls to the ministry's basic structure. One structural impediment for adaptability, for example, is that Foreign Service officers might spend their careers as administrative officers.

Some argued that as much as 30-40 percent of the ministry's activities are centered on "secretarial" functions, even though its Inspectorate General accounts for roughly 80 percent of the annual budget over the past five years. How can trained diplomats be expected to regularly and systematically assess, formulate and implement foreign policies if a third of their colleagues are in administrative functions?

As Henry Kissinger once said, "no foreign policy — no matter how ingenious — has any chance of success if it is born in the minds of a few and carried in the hearts of none."

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