

The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

INSCRIBED IN STONE

The Making of Jokowi's Foreign Policy Legacy

*With his second and final presidential term coming to an end in 2024, President Joko Widodo has two more years to consolidate his legacy. **ADHI PRIAMARIZKI** and **KEONI MARZUKI** explore the kind that the president intends to leave for Indonesia's foreign policy, and how he will achieve it.*



Visitors viewing a Balinese procession before the Covid-induced tourism crash. Jokowi worked hard to resuscitate the industry for the benefit of the locals after its initial impact. *Photo by Ruben Hutabarat on Unsplash.*

The practice of erecting stone inscriptions to commemorate the founding of important edifices, or the deeds and lineages of kings, was a characteristic feature of many ancient Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms on the island of Java. These inscriptions not only marked out the extent of the kingdoms, but also reflected the desire to leave behind visible monuments of their achievements for posterity. In much the same way,

successive Indonesian political leaders in the modern era have sought to define their presidencies through new foreign policy initiatives demarcating the interfaces between Indonesia and the wider world.

President Sukarno, for instance, is remembered today for his leadership role in the Asian-African Conference of 1955 that gave birth to the Bandung Spirit and the Non-Aligned Movement. In contrast, President Suharto's New Order regime was key to the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Indonesia expanded its international footprint: the country played an active role in international forums like the G20 and pioneered initiatives such as the Bali Democracy Forum. With two years left in office, President Joko Widodo himself is likely to be keen to consolidate his own legacy on the international stage.

From “Indonesia First” to International Spotlight

Throughout his first and second terms, President Jokowi has made it unequivocally clear that he is a domestic president, concerned with Indonesia's need for infrastructure development, bureaucratic reform, cutting red tape, and developing human capital. Critics and observers have often lambasted his administration for its inattention to diplomacy and international affairs. In stark contrast to Yudhoyono's approach to summit diplomacy and international norm entrepreneurship, Jokowi has emphasised that foreign policy needs to be grounded in providing tangible benefits for ordinary Indonesians (*diplomasi membumi*), calling upon Indonesian diplomats to market Indonesian products overseas and to provide consular assistance to Indonesian nationals abroad. Additionally, he has prioritised international forums more relevant to his developmentalist priorities.

Nonetheless, even after his Global Maritime Fulcrum initiative fizzled out, Jokowi seemed to have caught a second wind and became more personally involved in foreign policymaking during the Covid-19 era. For instance, in 2020, he [made his first appearance](#) at the United Nations General Assembly, albeit virtually, having sent then-vice president Jusuf Kalla in his stead throughout his first presidential term. More recently, Jokowi sought to take advantage of Indonesia's G20 presidency to pave the way for the resolution of the Russo-Ukrainian War. He [extended an invitation](#) to the G20 Summit in Bali this November to Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, and [resisted pressure](#) from the United States and several of its allies to keep Russia out of the group's meetings. In late June to early July 2022, Jokowi met with Zelensky and Russian president Vladimir Putin in Kyiv and Moscow respectively on what has sometimes been called a “peace mission”, expressing his keenness to serve as an [intermediary](#).

Raising Indonesia's International Profile by Domestic Showcasing

On top of international diplomacy, the other building block of Jokowi's international legacy consists of the hosting of international events. The 2018 Asian Games greatly boosted Indonesia's standing in Asia. Indonesia was able to plan and host the event with a truncated preparation time of four years, compared with the typical six, owing to the sudden withdrawal of the original host. Nevertheless, the event went smoothly without major disruptions.

The 2022 Indonesian Motorcycle Grand Prix is another example. This event marked Indonesia's return to MotoGP since the 1997 Grand Prix. It was held at the newly completed Mandalika International Street Circuit in Lombok, drawing about 60,000 spectators. The event was a success, considering the state of the pandemic at the time.

Shortly thereafter, Jakarta hosted its first ever Formula E event. Notwithstanding the domestic controversies surrounding the event, it put Indonesia on par with a handful of Asian countries that had hosted it in previous years, reinforcing Indonesia's international standing. Jokowi's personal attendance at the event allowed him to claim credit and catch the spotlight, even though he did not oversee the event management directly.

These showcases ultimately served two purposes. First, they highlighted Indonesia's determination to recover from the devastation brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and stimulated the domestic economy. Second, they helped to put Indonesia on the world map.

A Shift from Domestic Precedence?

Do Jokowi's recent appearances at international forums and initiatives to boost Indonesia's international profile reflect a change in his priorities and his approach to foreign policy? At first glance, they may seem like a departure from his initial domestically-driven foreign policy, his "Indonesia First" policy. However, on closer inspection, it is clear that Jokowi's recent international activism is still inextricably linked to his domestic agenda.

Indeed, Jokowi's appearances at international forums are largely linked to his desire to garner international support for Indonesia's Covid-19 challenges, in particular the boosting of domestic vaccination rates, and seeing to the country's post-pandemic recovery. Jokowi's June to July 2022 shuttle diplomacy between Ukraine and Russia was not so much aimed at brokering peace, as at alleviating the disruptions to the global food supply chain and the energy market brought about by the breakout of war. These disruptions have increased food and energy prices domestically, threatening to derail Indonesia's post-pandemic economic recovery.

Likewise, Indonesia's recent hosting of international mega-events was not just intended to increase the country's profile. It was also consistent with Jokowi's interest in reviving the domestic tourist industry, which had been hit disproportionately hard by the pandemic. Popular destinations such as Bali and Lombok experienced significant economic damage when the number of international tourists plunged, forcing businesses to shut down and increasing unemployment.

In short, Jokowi's international legacy does not entirely rest on the desire to raise Indonesia's profile, nor the active championing of international norms. Rather, it is underpinned by the bedrock of domestic interests — primarily economic interests.

At the end of the day, foreign policy and *diplomasi membumi* begin at home — foreign policy must yield tangible domestic results to be meaningful and, more importantly,

remembered. It follows therefore that Jokowi is likely to continue pursuing a domestically-rooted diplomatic strategy for the rest of his presidential term. With his consistently clear placement of these boundary markers in mind, it is indeed highly plausible that the Indonesian government will focus on a post-pandemic recovery agenda for its upcoming ASEAN chairmanship in 2023.

Adhi PRIAMARIZKI and Keoni MARZUKI are, respectively, *Visiting Fellow and Associate Research Fellow with the Indonesia Programme of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, RSIS. Their current research interests also include the progress of Indonesia's military modernisation.*

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg