

Indonesia's Niche Diplomacy through the Archipelagic and Island States Forum: Enhancing Maritime Foreign Policy

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Submitted : June 29th, 2025

Accepted : January 30th, 2026

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan *niche diplomacy* Indonesia selama menjadi ketua Forum Negara Kepulauan dan Pulau (AIS) pada tahun 2023. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dengan memanfaatkan konsep *niche diplomacy* untuk mendeskripsikan politik luar negeri maritim Indonesia sebagai negara *middle power*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Indonesia mempraktikkan *niche diplomacy* selama menjadi ketua Forum AIS tahun 2023 dengan meningkatkan politik luar negeri maritimnya melalui tiga cara. Pertama, Indonesia mengamankan isu spesifik dalam politik luar negeri maritim dengan mengatasi masalah lingkungan negara kepulauan dan pulau, mendorong peserta AIS untuk menandatangani Deklarasi Manado, dan menyediakan dana untuk mendirikan sekretariat untuk mendukung program-program Forum AIS. Kedua, Indonesia memperoleh kepentingan nasional dengan memilih isu-isu utama Forum AIS yang sejalan dengan pilar-pilar Poros Maritim Dunia, menjalankan kebijakan dalam negeri untuk mendukung Forum AIS, dan mendorong negara-negara lain untuk melakukan hal yang sama. Ketiga, Indonesia berkontribusi terhadap agenda internasional dengan berupaya mencapai Sustainable Development Goal 14, dan mempersiapkan Forum AIS untuk menjadi organisasi internasional. Dapat disimpulkan bahwa Indonesia sebagai *middle power* menjalankan *niche diplomacy* dengan memilih isu *low politics*, yaitu isu maritim yang perlu ditangani dalam kebijakan dalam dan luar negerinya, agar mencapai kepentingan nasional sekaligus membantu negara-negara lain.

Kata Kunci: Forum Negara Kepulauan dan Negara Pulau, Indonesia, Kebijakan Luar Negeri Maritim, Kekuatan Menengah, Niche Diplomacy

ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe Indonesia's niche diplomacy during its 2023 chairmanship of the Archipelagic and Island States (AIS) forum. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method, using the niche diplomacy concept to describe Indonesia's maritime foreign policy as a middle power. The result shows that Indonesia practiced niche diplomacy during its 2023 chairmanship of the AIS Forum by enhancing its maritime foreign policy in three ways. Firstly, Indonesia secures a niche in maritime foreign policy by addressing environmental problems faced by archipelagic and island states, encouraging AIS participants to sign the Manado Declaration, providing funding to establish an AIS Secretariat, and supporting the AIS Forum's programs. Secondly, Indonesia advances its national interests by selecting the AIS Forum's key issues in line with the Global Maritime Fulcrum's pillars, and by conducting domestic policies to support the AIS Forum, while encouraging other states to do the same. Thirdly, Indonesia contributes to the international agenda by striving to reach Sustainable Development Goal 14 and preparing the AIS Forum to become an international organization. In conclusion, Indonesia, as a middle power, conducted niche diplomacy by selecting a specific low political issue, i.e., the maritime issue, to be addressed through its domestic and foreign policies, to gain national interest and assist other states as well.

Keywords: The Archipelagic and Island States Forum, Indonesia, Maritime Foreign Policy, Middle Power, Niche Diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

Post-Cold War International Relations in the 21st Century is characterized by the active role of middle powers, who seek to shift the international discussion away from high-political issues that can spark conflict, such as claims over territorial sovereignty. By definition, middle powers are states with moderate influence and strategic importance within the international system, conducting foreign policies independently of great powers' decisions (Darmosumarto, 2013). Middle powers conduct niche diplomacy, which is a state's effort to select specific low-political issues (such as welfare, environmental sustainability, and human rights) to address through its foreign policy, thereby highlighting its leadership and contributions to the issue. For example, middle powers could establish international organizations or ad hoc coalitions that promote discussion and responses to international issues through multilateralism (Cooper, 1997).

This research seeks to describe niche diplomacy in the context of Indonesia's foreign policy as a middle power. On the one hand, Indonesia is a maritime state, with the Malacca Strait as an international trade route and a geostrategic location between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. On the other hand, Indonesia is also a middle power, as evidenced by its regional leadership among Southeast Asian states and its active representation of the interests of developing states in multilateral forums (Hidayatullah, 2017b). The gap addressed in this research concerns how Indonesia utilizes its maritime identity and resources to fulfill its role as a middle power, thereby producing niche diplomacy through the Archipelagic and Island States (AIS) forum in 2023.

Indonesia's efforts to project its identity as a maritime state engaged in international affairs began in its early years of independence in 1945. Indonesia's first Vice President, Muhammad Hatta, described Indonesia's positioning during the Cold War as rowing between the two reefs. This means that Indonesia pursued foreign policy independence amid the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, while maintaining friendly relations with all nations (Umar, 2023). When Indonesia was formed into a federal state by the Netherlands in the 1950s, Indonesia's last Prime Minister, Djuanda, attempted to reunite the nation into a unitary state by declaring Indonesia as an archipelagic state on 13 December 1957, which views the sea as island connectors, not separators (Jaya, Fasyehhudin & Sari, 2023). Indonesia's diplomatic efforts to gain international recognition as an archipelagic state gained success, with the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982, which legally grants archipelagic states' rights over the 200-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) beyond their territorial seas (Polanunu & Kusumaningrum, 2022).

Indonesia's independent and active foreign policy orientation emphasizes its determination to pursue strategic interests in international affairs, while contributing towards peace and cooperation (Umar, 2023). Middle and small powers conduct niche diplomacy to show their concern and contributions to international low politics rather than high politics, thereby serving their national interests (Cooper, 1997). By leveraging soft power, a middle power can attain leadership by demonstrating its willingness to resolve international problems (Hidayatullah, 2017a). Despite its historic identity as a maritime state, Indonesia has not used its role as a middle power to underscore the importance of maritime issues in multilateral diplomacy until the leadership of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi). Besides that, Indonesia has also pursued niche

diplomacy to promote moderate Islam by collaborating with civil society organizations to initiate international interfaith dialogues (Huijgh, 2017).

The purpose of this research is to analyze Indonesia's niche diplomacy in addressing maritime issues multilaterally during Joko Widodo's leadership. During Jokowi's first term as president, Indonesia has shown concern about maritime issues in its foreign policy. For instance, Jokowi declared that Indonesia will become a Global Maritime Fulcrum, projected as an international hub connecting various trade routes, thereby bringing prosperity to the region. As a result, Indonesia welcomed foreign investment to improve its maritime connectivity nationally and internationally. Additionally, Jokowi sank illegal fishing ships caught in Indonesia's EEZ and strengthened maritime defense in Natuna Island in the midst of China's claims to the South China Sea (Hidayatullah, 2025).

Indonesia's attempts to resolve other states' maritime issues have only been evident since Jokowi's second term of presidency, during its chairmanship of the Archipelagic and Island States Forum. The AIS forum was initiated on November 1st, 2018, in Manado, Indonesia, where ministers and representatives from 21 archipelagic and island states adopted the Manado Declaration (Kominfo, 2020). This Declaration was signed by Cabo Verde, Cuba, Cyprus, Fiji, Guinea Bissau, Indonesia, Jamaica, Japan, Malta, Madagascar, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Saint Christopher and Nevis, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Suriname, Timor Leste, Tonga, and the United Kingdom (Archipelagic & Island States Forum, 2018). The AIS Forum seeks to develop innovative solutions to address the challenges its member states face in maritime sustainability (Tsauro & Saraswati, 2023). In 2023, President Jokowi chaired the first AIS Forum High-Level Meeting with the theme 'Fostering Collaboration, Enabling Innovation for Our Ocean and Our Future', which discussed cooperation across four primary areas: climate change response, blue economy, marine resource management, and biodiversity preservation (Putri, 2023). The author argues that Indonesia demonstrates niche diplomacy as a middle power during its chairmanship of the Archipelagic and Island States (AIS) Forum high-level meeting in 2023, by enhancing its maritime foreign policy to advance its national interests and benefit the AIS Forum's member states.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is divided into two sections: previous studies on niche diplomacy in Indonesia's context as a middle power, and Indonesia's foreign policy as a maritime state. The first section on Indonesia's niche diplomacy as a middle power seeks to identify various low-political issues that have been promoted through Indonesia's foreign policy and to determine whether Indonesia has contributed to the interests of developing states in regional and multilateral forums in the context of resolving their maritime issues. The second section on Indonesia as a maritime state explores how it projects its identity and resources through its foreign policy and whether this is considered niche diplomacy.

Firstly, Indonesia has pursued niche diplomacy as a middle power to advance various low-politics agendas, including democracy and moderate Islam. Indonesia's foreign policy to promote democracy and moderate Islamic values is considered niche diplomacy because it

benefits other states beyond its own national interests. Through the Bali Democracy Forum and interfaith dialogues, Indonesia provided platforms for other states to confer their views on democracy and interreligious harmony. Indonesia promoted democratic values by inviting states to participate in annual multilateral forums such as the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF), which was initiated in 2008 (Acharya, 2014). The purpose of BDF was to endorse regional cooperation on democracy and improve Asia's political development (Sukma in Lee & Melissen, 2011). BDF invited government leaders and ministers from democratic and non-democratic states to discuss their experiences with democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (Huijgh, 2016). Indonesia had also encouraged BDF participant states to voluntarily improve their political systems regarding suitable democratic practices in each state's domestic context.

Indonesia has also organized various interfaith dialogues to promote religious tolerance and restore Indonesia's image as a moderate Muslim state. On December 6th–7th, 2004, Indonesia and Australia cosponsored the first Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue, held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia (Djuareva, 2014). This dialogue discussed issues of interfaith cooperation, community building, and harmony. Indonesia had also established the International Center for Religious and Cultural Cooperation in Yogyakarta under Muhammadiyah's management (Sukma in Lee & Melissen, 2011). In July 2005, Indonesia sponsored the first Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Bali (Djuareva, 2014). Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also collaborated with moderate Indonesian Islamic mass organizations to manage academic conferences on interfaith tolerance.

Whereas previous research on Indonesia's niche diplomacy in promoting maritime foreign policy generally discussed case studies during Jokowi's leadership, not earlier Indonesian presidents. For instance, Polanunu and Kusumaningrum (2022) argued that Indonesia conducted niche diplomacy in Blue-economy-based maritime development, by becoming a coalition builder in multilateral forums, a bridge builder between various states' national interests, and a catalyst of international norms on maritime issues. On the other hand, (Hara, 2025) argued that the discontinuation of the Global Maritime Fulcrum during Jokowi's second term has undermined Indonesia's leadership in maritime affairs. Conversely, this research fills a gap in previous studies by focusing on Indonesia's leadership at the AIS Forum's High-Level Meeting in 2023, which indicates the continuation of Indonesia's niche diplomacy on maritime issues.

Secondly, previous studies on Indonesia's maritime foreign policy highlighted efforts to protect maritime sovereignty and enhance maritime cooperation. Indonesia needs to protect its maritime sovereignty as an archipelagic country with a larger maritime area than land area, located between the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Jaya, Fasyehudin & Sari, 2023). Indonesia's efforts to protect its maritime sovereignty encompass safeguarding territorial integrity and conserving maritime resources, which reflects its identity as a maritime state. Previous research on Indonesia's efforts to protect maritime sovereignty has discussed its diplomacy in resolving territorial claims with neighboring states. For example, Yudhoyono has successfully resolved territorial and maritime disputes between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (Alvian, Putri & Ardhani, 2018). To protect its 200-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ), Indonesia had also mobilized military forces in the Natuna Islands in 2013-2014 and opened a military base in 2018 (Scott, 2014). This move was in response to China's claim on the South China Sea (Alvian, Putri

& Ardhani, 2018; Laksmana & Supriyanto, 2018). Indonesia believes that China's Nine-Dash Line is illegal under international law (Laksmana & Supriyanto, 2018).

Previous studies on Indonesia's efforts to conserve maritime resources have focused on combating Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing. Both Yudhoyono and Jokowi's administrations tried to protect Indonesia's maritime security from IUU fishing (Laksmana & Supriyanto, 2018). Yudhoyono initiated dialogue with neighboring countries to counter IUU fishing. Meanwhile, Jokowi implemented the 'sinking the ship' policy to prevent economic losses and environmental degradation (R & Burhanuddin, 2024; Alvian, Putri & Ardhani, 2018). During Yudhoyono's leadership, Foreign Minister Natalegawa emphasized the importance of aligning cooperation with the pursuit of binding regulations grounded in shared norms with the Indian and Pacific Ocean states. Subsequently, during Jokowi's leadership, Foreign Minister Marsudi emphasized the importance of building an Indo-Pacific cooperation based on ASEAN centrality (Scott, 2019).

Indonesia became a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), established in 1997 to improve regional and economic cooperation among 23 member states (Polanunu & Kusumaningrum, 2022). Indonesia served as IORA's chair in 2015-2017 during Jokowi's presidency, organizing IORA's initial Leaders' Summit and signing the Jakarta Concord. On the other hand, Indonesia has held observer status in the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) since 2011, due to its sovereignty over West Papua (Scott, 2019). Nevertheless, IORA remained a forum with unclear agendas and no urgent issues to address for its member states' interests. Besides that, Indonesia is not a full member state of the MSG; hence, it has been difficult for Indonesia to practice niche diplomacy through IORA or the MSG to secure leadership in maritime affairs.

Apart from participating in international organizations, President Jokowi introduced Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum to enhance regional and international cooperation and improve society's welfare (Polanunu & Kusumaningrum, 2022; Scott, 2019). It became Jokowi's vision to develop Indonesia's maritime capability to contribute to the international community in accordance with Indonesia's national interests (Laksmana & Supriyanto, 2018). The Global Maritime Fulcrum was compatible with China's Belt and Road Initiative and aimed to attract foreign investors to the maritime sector (Pratiwi et al., 2021). However, the Global Maritime Fulcrum was ineffective in supporting Indonesia's leadership on maritime issues. This is because the implementation of the Global Maritime Fulcrum is still focused on Indonesia's domestic affairs (Laksmana & Supriyanto, 2018). The growing rivalry between China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the United States' Free and Open Indo-Pacific also overshadowed the significance of the Global Maritime Fulcrum in the region (Pratiwi, et.al., 2021).

This literature review summarizes that previous studies on Indonesia's niche diplomacy as a middle power in promoting low-political issues to benefit other states mainly focus on democracy and moderate Islam, and not much on maritime issues. Conversely, previous studies on Indonesia's maritime foreign policy focus on policies that advance Indonesia's national interests rather than those of other states. Hence, this research fills a gap in previous studies by highlighting Indonesia's niche diplomacy as a middle power, promoting maritime issues through

the AIS Forum's High-Level Meeting in 2023, which not only serves Indonesia's national interests but also benefits the forum's member states.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive-qualitative method to describe niche diplomacy in the context of Indonesia's maritime foreign policy as a middle power. The researcher serves as the primary instrument for collecting data by examining documents and interpreting information to derive additional meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data collection is conducted through documentation, including gathering references on Indonesia's niche diplomacy as a middle power and its maritime foreign policy from books, journal articles, and news sites. The author divides the analytical framework into three sections to describe Indonesia's niche diplomacy in conducting maritime foreign policy as a middle power. First, the definition of middle powers is used to understand middle powers' role in regional and multilateral affairs. Second, the definition of niche diplomacy is used to identify the indicators that middle powers need to fulfill to conduct foreign policy that uniquely addresses low-political issues internationally. Third, the definition of maritime foreign policy, to examine whether Indonesia's 2023 chairmanship of the Archipelagic and Island States (AIS) Forum could contribute to Indonesia's leadership in maritime issues.

Primarily, middle powers are states that can exert foreign policy independently, without relying on great powers, by leveraging their multilateral influence (Hidayatullah, 2017a). Middle Powers have resources that attract major powers; can implement niche diplomacy on key issues that benefit national interests; contribute to regional peace and security; and uphold multilateralism in problem-solving (Pratiwi, et al., 2021). (Hidayatullah, 2017a) divides middle powers based on their regional and multilateral roles into: enforcers, capable of enforcing policies to their neighboring states in the region; assemblers, having institutionalized cooperation with neighboring states in the region; and advocates, promoting issue-based coalitions in multilateral diplomacy. In this research, Indonesia is described as a middle-power advocate that seeks to maintain foreign policy independence by creating the AIS Forum as a multilateral platform to build a coalition of like-minded states to address maritime problems jointly.

Furthermore, niche diplomacy is defined as how states could generate benefits from their diplomatic contributions towards other states in specific international issues (Henrikson, 2005). Thus, indicators of niche diplomacy conducted by middle powers are used to determine the results and discussion sections of this research. A middle power's ability to conduct niche diplomacy can be measured, first, by distinguishing itself in foreign policy (Smith, 1999). Middle powers need to deliberately select low-priority political issues to address in their foreign policy. The issues selected could be based on the state's decision-making experience, to improve its international reputation, and to display uniqueness compared to great powers. Secondly, middle powers conduct niche diplomacy by acquiring national interests through their foreign policies (Smith, 1999). They must utilize their resources to contribute to an international cause, which will also bring them an advantage as compared to other states on that specific issue (Cooper, 1997). By acquiring leadership in multilateral forums, middle powers will be able to capture the attention of domestic and international audiences, which will eventually bring back benefits for the policymaker (Henrikson, 2005). Thirdly, middle powers conduct niche diplomacy by

contributing towards the international agenda on specific low-political issues through effective and impactful foreign policies (Smith, 1999). By supporting international good causes beyond its national interest, the middle power will improve its reputation. International support is essential in determining the success of an international cause, without the need to force other states to comply. Additionally, it is also helpful to seek support from non-governmental organizations as well. In fact, successful niche diplomacy depends on compatibility with other states' values, being trustworthy and consistent in supporting the international cause, and in accordance with the international community's expectations (Henrikson, 2005).

The definition of maritime foreign policy in this research refers to the foreign policy of archipelagic states, which must consider external maritime conditions to achieve national interests (Laksmana & Supriyanto, 2018). For instance, Indonesia's foreign policy as an archipelagic state needs to defend its maritime interests, amidst the rising tension due to the great powers' rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, to successfully project the state as a maritime power, Indonesia needs to maintain a greater presence in the Indo-Pacific region (Scott, 2019). In this research, the author describes Indonesia as a middle power that seeks leadership in maritime issues by conducting niche diplomacy to attain its national interest while assisting other states through the Archipelagic and Island States Forum in 2023.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion of this research are structured into three parts. First, discussing Indonesia as a middle-power advocate to describe how Indonesia promotes maritime issue-based coalitions in multilateral diplomacy through the Archipelagic and Island States (AIS) Forum. Second, describing Indonesia's niche diplomacy while becoming the chair of the AIS Forum's High-Level Meeting, to find out how Indonesia secures niche, acquire national interest, and contribute towards the international agenda, Lastly, describing Indonesia's leadership in the AIS Forum in 2023 as maritime foreign policy, to examine how Indonesia considers external maritime conditions to achieve its national interests.

Indonesia as a Middle Power Advocate in Promoting Maritime Issue-based Coalition

The author identifies Indonesia as a middle-power advocate during its chairmanship of the AIS Forum's High-Level Meeting in 2023. This could be identified through several characteristics, i.e. organizing a coalition of states based on low political issue; the meeting to discuss the issue is ad-hoc; the scope of the forum is multilateral, not regional; having short term influence towards the coalition of states; and requiring agreements and protocols to renew the coalition's commitment in contributing towards the low-political issue (Hidayatullah, 2017a). As a middle-power advocate, Indonesia has been able to promote maritime issues within the coalition of states, in this case, the AIS Forum. Indonesia defined a niche in foreign policy by introducing the Archipelagic and Island States (AIS) Forum at the first UN Ocean Conference in New York in 2017, to attract the interest of participating states. The expected participants in the AIS Forum were archipelagic and island states, which are among the most vulnerable to climate change (Putri, 2024). Furthermore, Indonesia became a coalition builder by hosting forums, a bridge

builder for state-to-state cooperation, and a catalyst by promoting international norms on maritime affairs (Polanunu & Kusumaningrum, 2022).

Indonesia started the AIS Forum as an ad hoc coalition by welcoming archipelagic and island states to Manado in 2018. The forum was attended by 32 country representatives and four international organizations. The participants were committed to upholding the Manado Declaration and working together to implement sustainable development in line with SDG 14. To maintain the AIS Forum's sustainability, Indonesia held the First High-Level Meeting of the AIS Forum on October 11th, 2023, in Bali, with the theme "Fostering Collaboration, Enabling Innovation. For Our Ocean, and Our Future" (Santoso, 2023). The AIS Forum is inclusive because it welcomes 51 nations regardless of their territorial size or economic development, united by island-nation characteristics and a mutual interest in tackling common problems (Ridani, 2024). The AIS Forum welcomes member states from various regional organizations, including ASEAN, Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), Pacific Island Forum (PIF), and UNDP Indonesia (Romdoni, 2024).

Due to its short-term influence on the coalition of states, the forum required member states to sign agreements and protocols to renew the coalition's commitment to addressing the low-political issue. When Indonesia initiated the first AIS Ministerial Meeting in Manado in 2018, member states were encouraged to comply with the Manado Joint Declaration, signed by 21 member states. In 2019, Indonesia hosted the second AIS Ministerial Meeting in Manado and secured support from 25 states and four international organizations to convene the first high-level meeting of the AIS Forum in the near future. Furthermore, Indonesia actively participated in the AIS Forum each year to address the mutual problems faced by the forum's member states.

In line with Indonesia's determination to continue the AIS Forum, participant states have also agreed to the principles of the Manado Declaration, with a commitment to implement its principles in their respective countries. Communities and businesses from the forum's participant states contribute by sharing opportunities and best practices to benefit other states as well. For instance, coastal communities in rural islands of the archipelagic and island states are prone to the impact of climate change (Setkab, 2023). In response, Indonesia proposed using floating cages for fish farming in the Pacific Island states. This included organizing a training to build fishing cages in Fiji and introducing fish aggregating devices to Madagascar (Haryati, 2023).

The AIS Forum's participants also agreed on Blue Economy Cooperation, which encompasses the sustainable use of marine resources for economic development. President Jokowi insisted that Indonesia will support the AIS forum to foster cooperation between archipelagic and island states. Thus, Indonesia has contributed US\$5 million to the AIS Forum for 2022-2025 (Haryati, 2023; Tsauro & Saraswati, 2023). The grant funds for AIS member states and developing countries will be used for scholarships, joint research, blue startup businesses, the digitalization of small and medium enterprises to address climate change, and the development of innovations and sustainable ocean governance (Santoso, 2023). Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi highlighted the uniqueness of AIS as a forum that focuses on practical cooperation and community-based development, including ideas initiated by the youth (Sinaga, 2023). For

example, the AIS Blue Economy Dialogue on October 9th, 2023, in Bali discussed strategies, maritime governance, and technology, and learning from best practices to determine the Blue Economy Development Index (BEDI). Furthermore, the AIS Blue Business Summit, as a side event, served as a platform for discussing the outline of a sustainable financing mechanism that involves the private sector, including SMEs, to mobilize their resources. Likewise, Indonesia also hosted the Sustainable Business Ecosystem Training for women entrepreneurs in Jakarta on October 23rd -24th, 2023.

Furthermore, the AIS Forum has established a Secretariat under the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (Archipelagic & Island States Forum, 2023). At the fifth Ministerial Meeting of the AIS Forum, participant states agreed to establish the AIS as an international organization, based on a charter and a roadmap (Santoso, 2023 & Sinaga, 2023). To do so, the AIS Forum would establish an advisory board within the current secretariat, along with four main divisions: Climate Change Mitigation, Blue Economy, Marine Plastic Debris, and Good Maritime Governance. The meeting concluded with a plan to establish the Blue Hub and Research and Development Center in 2024. Odo Manahutu, the Deputy for Tourism and Creative Economy, Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment, argued that the AIS Forum's significance will be felt in 10 to 15 years, as a platform for its member states to respond to problems faced by island states. It was perceived that the AIS Forum would become an international organization (Ridani, 2024). The regional director offices of the AIS have also been established in Barbados for the Caribbean, Madagascar for the Indian Ocean region, and Fiji for the Pacific Ocean region, with the task of communicating with local communities to establish programs relevant to support the AIS Forum secretariat.

Additionally, businesses from AIS Forum's participant states participated in follow-up programs, including joint research and development to empower SMEs and promote startup collaboration (Benmetan, 2023). The UNDP highlighted that the AIS Forum supports the expansion of 500 startups and digital-based SMEs. For instance, by organizing training and workshops for women, youth, and people with disabilities, to develop their businesses (Haryati, 2023).

Indonesia's Niche Diplomacy through the AIS Forum

Indonesia has secured maritime issues in its foreign policy by introducing the AIS Forum, a non-binding, inclusive forum for its member states. Indonesia did not pressure other states to comply with the rules, but welcomed voluntary contributions from the AIS participant states. Indonesia hosted the AIS Forum to facilitate government-to-government and business-to-business collaboration in maritime cooperation (Hidayatullah, 2025). President Joko Widodo stated that Indonesia will always be at the forefront of supporting cooperation among the AIS Forum's member states (Romdoni, 2024). Luhut Pandjaitan further emphasized that through the AIS Forum, Indonesia is committed to assisting other island nations, especially developing states (Ridani, 2024).

When the first high-level meeting of the AIS Forum was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Indonesia held the third AIS Ministerial Meeting in its place

virtually. The meeting launched the AIS Blue Startup Hub, AIS Research and Development, and collaboration on intelligent and innovative solutions, as well as innovative financing. Afterwards, in 2021, during the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (COP 26), Indonesia stated that the AIS is committed to supporting the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In 2022, Indonesia held the fourth AIS Ministerial Meeting in Bali, with 22 states and two international organizations participating. The meeting agreed to collaborate on sustainable and healthy oceans and to hold the first high-level meeting the following year. Finally, in 2023, Indonesia held the first high-level meeting and the fifth AIS Ministerial Meeting in Bali (Archipelagic & Island States Forum, 2023).

A middle power aims to advance its national interest through niche diplomacy, which involves generating benefits from international contributions and capturing the attention of international audiences to increase support and improve its national reputation (Henrikson, 2005). Indonesia benefited from its international contributions at the AIS Forum by raising key issues aligned with its national interests. The AIS Forum's First High-Level Meeting in 2023 identified four key issues: climate change mitigation, protection of the marine environment, sustainable economic development, and good maritime governance (Archipelagic & Island States Forum, 2023). This was in line with Indonesia's five pillars of Jokowi's Global Maritime Fulcrum: establishing a maritime culture, preservation and management of marine resources, building infrastructure for maritime connectivity, maritime cooperation through diplomacy, and developing marine defense forces (Setkab, 2015). Additionally, during the AIS Forum in 2023, Indonesia emphasized the importance of innovative financing and business acceleration programs for MSMEs, as well as support for women entrepreneurs (Ridani, 2024).

Indonesia benefitted from its AIS Forum chairmanship by establishing leadership among maritime states (Hidayatullah, 2025), contributing to its GDP through the blue economy, countering climate change impacts, including rising sea levels, and improving maritime security (Tsauri & Saraswati, 2023). Indonesia is an archipelagic nation with a larger maritime area than its land territory; therefore, the AIS Forum's achievements would also serve Indonesia's national interests (Ridani, 2024). For example, Indonesia utilized the AIS Forum to enhance its blue economy, support blue economy cooperation, and manage marine debris through building a marine-based economy while maintaining the sustainability of marine resources (Polanunu & Kusumaningrum, 2022). Furthermore, Indonesia attempted to conduct domestic policies that exemplify seriousness in leading the maritime issue, to persuade other states to support the AIS Forum's agenda as well. Indonesia hosted the AIS Forum's First High-level Meeting on October 10th-11th, 2023, in Bali. This forum welcomed 52 states' participants, among whom 32 were represented by ministers or heads of state (Tsauri & Saraswati, 2023). Domestically, Indonesia conducted policies that support the AIS Forum's agenda, such as Indonesia's Maritime Vision 2030 based on the Presidential Decree No. 16 year 2017 mentions seven pillars of maritime development, which are: management of maritime and human resources; security and law enforcement in the sea; ocean governance; economic and maritime infrastructure to improve welfare; marine environment conservation; maritime culture; and maritime diplomacy (Polanunu & Kusumaningrum, 2022; Scott, 2019). This decree is implemented by upholding three principles: an archipelagic outlook in line with Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution; sustainable

development; and the blue economy, which balances marine conservation and exploitation for economic development (Polanunu & Kusumaningrum, 2022).

Indonesia seeks to develop its blue economy, which includes marine and fisheries-based sectors (Amri & Zahidi, 2023). Indonesia's fishery potential reaches 12,5 million per year; therefore, the AIS Forum has been crucial for Indonesia to advance its fisheries interest in the multilateral forum (Ridani, 2024). The AIS Forum provided an opportunity for Indonesia to increase trade profits, welcome maritime investment, and promote marine tourism through strong partnerships with other countries. Through the AIS Forum, Indonesia could persuade other countries to develop the country's maritime potential.

A middle power exercises niche diplomacy to support an international cause by collaborating with like-minded states for mutual benefit, advancing foreign policies compatible with other states' values, and stimulating collaboration and cooperation, whether ad hoc or through the establishment of an international organization (Henrikson, 2005 & Cooper, 1997). Nevertheless, the middle power should not force other states to comply with the agreed framework; instead, it should support voluntary contributions. Through the AIS Forum, Indonesia supported the international environmental agenda, as a low-priority political issue, by promoting the signing of the Manado Declaration. The Manado Declaration recognized the different kinds and scales of environmental challenges faced by its member states. It also highlighted the need for collaboration between states and non-state entities to combat climate change. The AIS member states were committed to the sustainable use of the sea and its marine resources to achieve SDG 14. AIS member states reaffirmed their commitment to supporting international environmental regimes, such as the Paris Agreement. Based on the Manado Declaration, every AIS Forum meeting typically discussed cooperation on climate change mitigation, economic challenges and opportunities, marine plastic debris, and good maritime governance (Archipelagic & Island States Forum, 2018).

The AIS Forum's establishment signified Indonesia's contributions to the development and enforcement of international law of the sea through the signing of the Manado Joint Declaration in 2018, followed by the Ocean Conference in New York (Romdoni, 2024). Although a declaration was considered soft law with no legal force, it served as a basis for a code of conduct among the AIS Forum's members, highlighting mutual commitment. Furthermore, Indonesia's commitment to addressing environmental problems faced by AIS member states exemplifies its efforts to secure a niche in maritime issues. The signing of the Manado Declaration ensured the sustainability of Indonesia's leadership on the AIS Forum.

Indonesia's niche diplomacy through the AIS Forum found distinction in the great powers' international agenda, which focuses on high political issues. Indonesia's policy in organizing the AIS Forum's First High-level Meeting in 2023 aims to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which address four key issues: climate change as a mutual challenge, blue economy for sustainable economic development, combating ocean pollution, and improving maritime governance (Tsauro & Saraswati, 2023 & Kominfo, 2020). The AIS Forum's key issues aimed to reach SDG 14 on Underwater Biodiversity through research and development, entrepreneurship, blue financing, and international collaboration (Archipelagic &

Island States Forum, 2023). Furthermore, the head of the AIS Forum Secretariat, Rini Modaso, explained that the AIS Forum aimed to develop collective measures to address climate change-related issues and their implications (Benmetan, 2023). Luhut Pandjaitan added that the AIS forum sought to implement tangible programs to mitigate the impacts of climate change by addressing the needs of its member states (Haryati, 2023). In short, Indonesia implemented policies to support sustainable marine development, both domestically and internationally, by increasing cooperation on maritime affairs to achieve SDG 14 targets (Polanunu & Kusumaningrum, 2022).

Indonesia's Leadership in the AIS Forum as Maritime Foreign Policy

Initially, Indonesia considered external maritime conditions in conducting foreign policy through understanding the problems faced by Island nations regarding the impact of climate change, which highly affects their territorial survival. As sea level rises, small island nations face the threat of sinking (Pandjaitan & Bahuat, 2018). Ironically, small Island nations lack adequate diplomatic capacity to voice their concerns about the impacts of climate change in international forums. Thus, Indonesia stepped in to discuss the development challenges faced by island states amid climate change through the AIS forum. Indonesia's establishment of the AIS Forum in 2018 signified its leadership on maritime issues. For instance, fishermen in archipelagic and island states face difficulty determining the fishing season due to unpredictable weather resulting from climate change (Putri, 2024). In response, Indonesia seeks to work with other states facing similar problems while resolving domestic issues such as rising sea levels, plastic waste, and declining fish catches (Setkab, 2023).

As a result, Indonesia gained leadership in maritime issues, as evidenced by its influence on the AIS Forum across four areas: endorsing the Leaders' Declaration, institutional transformation, financial contributions, and the blue economic platform. First, Indonesia encouraged the AIS Forum's member states to adopt the Leaders' Declaration, a soft law grounded in solidarity, which emphasized the need for AIS member states to have a common voice in promoting global standards for climate change mitigation and sustainable marine resource management. Collaboration between AIS Forum's participant states is based on policy-making, adopting best practices, and leveraging information technology, with youth in member countries engaged. The forum also needed to consider the post-COVID conditions of its member states to accelerate economic recovery (Kominfo, 2020). The forum sought to address common problems while ensuring that all member states are involved in the decision-making process and benefit from those decisions (Kominfo, 2020). In short, through the AIS Forum, Indonesia provided a space for participants to discuss solutions to mutual maritime problems.

Second, Indonesia supported the AIS Forum's institutional transformation from an ad hoc forum into a formal treaty-based international organization with permanent headquarters, thereby boosting the forum's diplomatic influence. In 2019, Indonesia allocated USD 1 million to establish a secretariat for the AIS Forum at Menara Thamrin in Jakarta (Haryati, 2023). This signified Indonesia's determination to contribute to the forum sustainably in the long run (Archipelagic & Island States Forum, 2023). Additionally, the AIS Forum has also opened

representative offices in Barbados and Madagascar (Tsauro & Saraswati, 2023). The AIS Forum was expected to become a treaty-based international organization in the future, to maintain the sustainability of cooperation on the mutual interest of its member states.

Third, Indonesia provided a USD 5 million financial contribution to the AIS Forum to continue programs that benefit member states. For example, the AIS Forum held its second ministerial meeting on November 1st, 2019, in Manado with the theme of Ecotourism. This meeting was attended by 25 states and four international organizations, including UNDP and ASEAN. This meeting was held simultaneously with a Startup and Business Summit (Kominfo, 2020). AIS Blue Startup Hub was launched in 2020, becoming a way for AIS Forum's member states to meet investors, develop local businesses through mentoring programs, and mitigate the impact of natural disasters. Christopher Bahuet, the Head of UNDP Indonesia, supports Indonesia's initiative to reach the SDG 13 on Climate Action and SDG 14 on Underwater Biodiversity (Kominfo, 2020).

Lastly, Indonesia launched the Blue Hub, a platform that facilitates funding for entrepreneurs and start-up businesses, especially related to the blue economy, to acquire economic benefits. The Blue Hub has a research center, which enables information sharing among the AIS Forum's member states (Archipelagic & Island States Forum, 2023). The Blue Hub held the AIS Blue Innovation Solution on June 26th, 2023, which served as a matchmaking venue for investors and blue entrepreneurs, including 10 Indonesian MSMEs. The AIS Blue Innovation Solution was also open to collaboration with foreign stakeholders, including providing funding for MSMEs in Fiji, Jamaica, and Madagascar. Indonesia also benefited from the Blue Hub by generating funding for local marine-based MSMEs. For instance, the Blue Hub developed a digital ecosystem for MSMEs to launch assessment programs in Indonesia's priority tourism destinations. The Blue Hub has also organized various events in Indonesia, such as the Island Hackathon and Clean Up, which initiated the idea of turning plastic waste into fuel. Indonesia also hosted World Oceans Day and Island Clean Up on April 28th-30th, 2023, in collaboration with the Bogor Institute of Agriculture (IPB) students' council. Furthermore, three Indonesian universities, namely Universitas Halu Oleo, Universitas Mesamus Merauke, and Universitas Kristen Papua, organized a Beach Cleanup and Mangrove Conservation Program in August 2023 in Wakatobi (Archipelagic & Island States Forum, 2023). Therefore, by taking into account the problems faced by archipelagic and island states as external conditions, Indonesia has pursued a foreign policy to establish leadership on maritime issues through the AIS Forum.

CONCLUSION

This research has addressed the puzzle of how Indonesia conducts niche diplomacy, in reference to its identity as a maritime state, and its regional and multilateral role as a middle power. In conclusion, niche diplomacy in the Indonesian context means determining specific issues in foreign policy that reflect its national identity, pursuing national interests, and paving the way to contribute to resolving other states' problems, which has resulted in Indonesia's leadership on the issue. In the context of Indonesia as a maritime state, niche diplomacy enables Indonesia to safeguard maritime sovereignty and resources, and to leverage its maritime assets to develop the blue economy through cooperation and foreign investment. In the context of

Indonesia as a middle power, niche diplomacy is necessary to maintain its leadership in regional and multilateral affairs. For example, Indonesia played the role of a middle-power advocate during its chairmanship of the AIS Forum by organizing a coalition of states based on mutual concern for member states' maritime challenges.

Furthermore, this research has also contributed to filling gaps in previous studies in three ways: first, by describing how Indonesia secures maritime issues as its niche in foreign policy. Indonesia secures niche in maritime foreign policy through the AIS Forum by seeking a distinct issue to address, i.e. the archipelagic and island states' environmental problems; supporting international environmental agenda by encouraging AIS Forum participants to sign the Manado Declaration; and utilizing resources, including funding and establishing an AIS Forum secretariat to support an international cause, which is reaching the SDG 14 targets. Second, by describing how Indonesia obtains national interest through the AIS Forum. Indonesia advanced its national interests during its chairmanship of the AIS Forum in 2023 by aligning the AIS Forum's key issues with the Global Maritime Fulcrum's pillars, advancing domestic foreign policy to support the AIS Forum's agenda, and encouraging other states to do the same.

This study has also described how Indonesia has contributed towards international maritime causes during its chairmanship of the AIS Forum in 2023 by seeking compatibility with international law and SDGs, supporting ad hoc coalitions during the forums, while preparing to develop the AIS Forum into a charter-based international organization, as well as welcoming voluntary contributions from AIS Forum Participants to implement the Manado Declaration in their respective policies. This shows that middle powers attempting to exercise leadership on a specific low-level political issue need to secure a niche in the problem to be addressed, one that aligns with national interests and benefits other states as well. The author recommends that future researchers elaborate on Indonesia's efforts to pursue niche diplomacy on maritime issues by engaging other forums and organizations, such as the IORA. In addition, future research should examine the sustainability of the AIS Forum, the participant states' active contribution in the forum, and the effectiveness of the Manado Declaration's implementation.

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