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From Identity to Diplomacy: Indonesia's Moderate Islam and Afghanistan Peacebuilding under Jokowi (2017-2021)

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Indonesia has increasingly engaged in Afghanistan's peacebuilding process, yet the specific mechanisms linking this engagement to the construction of state identity remain underexplored. This article analyzes why and how Indonesia constructs and projects moderate Islamic identity to shape its foreign policy in Afghanistan under President Joko Widodo. Using the theory of constructivism and qualitative discourse analysis of officials statements, policy documents, publications from Indonesian Islamic civil society, and academic works, this article examines how environmental structures influence policy construction. The findings reveal that this identity is constructed as a response to both external structures, specifically the failure of militaristic approaches in Afghanistan and the proliferation of radical Islamic groups, and internal structures, namely domestic political polarization. Consequently, Indonesia projects moderate Islam as a "soft-power" instrument to offer alternative conflict resolution mechanisms in Afghanistan while concurrently reaffirming such identity and maintaining domestic consolidation. This article contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering a nuanced understanding of how religious identity functions as a dual mechanism for international mediation and domestic stability in Muslim-majority democracies.

Keywords: *constructivism; moderate Islamic identity; Indonesia; Afghanistan peacebuilding*

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's goal of promoting moderate Islam internationally has progressively influenced its foreign policy direction, particularly during the presidency of Joko Widodo, commonly referred to as Jokowi. While the discourse surrounding moderate Islamic identity in Indonesia's foreign policy has gained greater visibility over the past twenty years, current academic research often emphasizes either its historical development or its religious-political narrative within Indonesia (Andriasanti 2014; Anwar 2010; Nugraha 2012). Much less attention has been given to insight how this identity is constructed in response to external and internal political structures and why this identity becomes central in specific foreign policy arenas, in this context, Indonesia's involvement in the Afghanistan peacebuilding. Existing literature also tends to treat Indonesia's activities in Afghanistan descriptively, focusing on what Indonesia did rather than analyzing why moderate Islam becomes the diplomatic framework guiding Indonesia's policies in the Afghan context (Farizan and Heryadi 2020; Mosamim, Widianingsih, and Abdoellah 2020).

This article addresses these gaps by arguing that Indonesia's involvement in Afghanistan cannot be understood solely as humanitarian contribution or diplomatic goodwill. Instead, Indonesia's role is deeply tied to the construction of its moderate Islamic identity, which emerges from the interaction of two environmental structures. From an external perspective, Afghanistan serves as a multifaceted arena characterized by the militarization of major powers and the mobilization of radical Islamist factions. These dynamics influence Indonesia's understanding of global Islam, radicalism, and the constraints associated with militaristic strategies. Internally, Indonesia's post-2014 domestic political polarization has resulted in conflicting

interpretations of Islamic authority, social tensions, and fading identities. This situation has forced the state to institutionalize a more assertive narrative of moderate Islam, one that can serve both domestic consolidation and identity reaffirmation.

Drawing on Katzenstein's constructivism and extended interpretations of state identity formation, this article reveals why and how Indonesia constructs moderate Islamic identity in response to both external and internal structures. It argues that Afghanistan provides not only a diplomatic arena but also a symbolic landscape through which Indonesia articulates its preferred Islamic identity (moderate, peaceful, and tolerant). In this sense, the Afghanistan conflict becomes a key site where Indonesia enacts this identity by social reconstruction initiatives.

By integrating external and internal structures within a single analytical framework, this article contributes to existing discussions by (1) demonstrating how identity shapes Indonesia's interests and policy choices in the Afghanistan peacebuilding and (2) clarifying Indonesia's motivations under Jokowi, which involve concerns about radical groups, humanitarian crises, international reputation, and domestic consolidation.

To illuminate these dynamics, this article is structured as follows. The Literature Review examines previous scholarship on moderate Islam in Indonesia and Indonesia-Afghanistan relations. The theoretical framework delineates the role of constructivism in elucidating the processes of identity formation and policy development. The findings and discussion section examines both external and internal factors that influence Indonesia's moderate Islamic identity, its strategic interests, and its efforts in peacebuilding within Afghanistan. This article concludes by

evaluating Indonesia's achievements and limitations in the Afghan peace process and reflects on broader implications for Indonesia's foreign policy.

Literature Review

The Debate on Islam in Indonesian Foreign Policy

Studies on moderate Islam in Indonesia have proliferated alongside Indonesia's effort to frame moderate Islam as a new identity in its international engagement. Early works tend to explore Indonesia's Islamic character in broad terms, often emphasizing the complex intersection between national ideology and religious identity. For instance, Sukma (2006) argued that Indonesia faces a "dual identity" dilemma, where the nation's Islamic character is often constrained by its Pancasila-based secular nationalism, resulting in a foreign policy where Islam is largely symbolic rather than instrumental. While this argument has contributed to early understandings of Indonesia's foreign policy behavior, later scholarship challenges this by noting that Indonesia has increasingly embraced Islamic discourse, particularly in response to global events such as the rise of terrorism and the War on Terror.

Umar (2016) contended that post-Reformasi Indonesia, particularly since the Megawati administration, has actively incorporated moderate Islam into its foreign policy as a response to the Global War on Terror. Umar argued that moderate Islam was a strategic alignment with international discourses that dichotomized "moderate" vs. "radical" Muslims. Extending this perspective, Purwono (2017) emphasizes the role of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah in promoting Islam *rahmatan lil 'alamin*. He demonstrates how these organizations help integrate Islamic norms into Indonesia's

foreign policy, particularly during the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono era. Nevertheless, although Purwono effectively underscored the significance of non-state actors, his research did not comprehensively explore the ways in which external conflict contexts influence the formation of Islamic identity in the realm of foreign policy.

Indonesia's Involvement in Afghanistan Peacebuilding

A growing body of literature also focuses on Indonesia's involvement in the Afghanistan peacebuilding. Studies by Mosamim et al. (2020), Zaman (2020), and Sugara (2021) examined Indonesia's practical contributions, emphasizing diplomatic activities, religious dialogue, and humanitarian support. These studies collectively captured the breadth of Indonesia's initiatives but remained largely descriptive. They did not explain why Indonesia intensifies its involvement in Afghanistan or how such engagements relate to Indonesia's identity construction. Complementing these state-focused accounts, Sari and Hartati (2023) provided an analysis of Indonesia's interests under Joko Widodo's administration between 2014 and 2019. Sari and Hartati argued that Indonesia's participation is driven by the constitutional mandate for world order and efforts to enhance Indonesia's diplomatic image on the global stage. While this studies successfully mapped out Indonesia's interests, they offered limited analytical insight into why the specific narrative of moderate Islam was chosen as the primary instrument.

Other scholars examined Indonesia's involvement through the lens of non-state actors. Pratama and Ferdiyan (2021), Mu'min et al. (2021), and Mahfudin and Sundrijo (2021) highlighted NU's peace efforts in Afghanistan; Rikza (2021) further analyzed specifies how NU repositions its religious authority to support conflict

transformation in Afghanistan between 2013 and 2019. Fatimatuzzahro and Yumitro (2022) compared Indonesia's policies before and after the Taliban's return to power in 2021. However, these works also did not provide a comprehensive explanation of the identity-based motivations underlying Indonesia's actions.

There remains a significant gap in the literature about (1) how external structures, such as the militarized nature of the Afghanistan conflict and the proliferation of transnational radicalism, shape Indonesia's construction of a moderate Islamic identity; and (2) how internal political polarization influences the state's need to reinforce moderate Islam through foreign policy. Previous works recognize moderate Islam as a foreign policy narrative but rarely connect it to the broader structural context in which Indonesia formulates its identity.

This article aims to address these analytical gaps by illustrating that Indonesia's engagement in Afghanistan transcends mere expressions of solidarity. Instead, Afghanistan serves as a platform through which Indonesia shapes and showcases its moderate Islamic identity in reaction to both international and domestic influences. By examining how environmental structures shape Indonesia's identity and how this identity shapes policy, this article builds on and goes beyond existing scholarship, offering a more integrated explanation of Indonesia's foreign policy in Afghanistan.

Theoretical Framework

This article employs the theory of constructivism to analyze the construction and projection of Indonesia's moderate Islamic identity in the context of its involvement in Afghanistan. Constructivism, as articulated by Katzenstein (1996), emphasized that state

interests and actions cannot be understood solely through material capabilities; rather, they are shaped by identities, norms, and intersubjective understandings embedded within social and political environments. Katzenstein argued that environmental structures play a constitutive role in shaping national identity, which in turn informs foreign policy behavior.

To operationalize the framework, this study draws on Alexandrov's distinction between internal and external environmental structures, which exert simultaneous pressure on state identity. External structures are international norms, global discourses, or systemic pressures (Alexandrov 2003). In this research, the main external framework is characterized by the engagement of major powers, which resulted in the militarization of Afghanistan and the rise of radical Islamic factions. These circumstances affect Indonesia's comprehension of global Islam, radicalism, and the constraints of militarized strategies in resolving conflicts. Meanwhile, internal structures are domestic cultural norms, political contestations, and identity struggles. For Indonesia, this refers to the polarization of domestic politics, competition for Islamic authority among religious actors, and the state's efforts to maintain domestic consolidation following increased sectarian tensions and the fading reputation of Indonesia as a moderate Muslim-majority country.

Drawing upon constructivist principles, the framework presented in this article adheres to a causal progression. Initially, Indonesia perceives external threats and internal divisions through a normative perspective, leading to a specific self-conception as a moderate Islamic entity. Subsequently, this identity influences Indonesia's foreign policy objectives, which include offering alternative mechanisms for conflict resolution, curbing the proliferation of

radicalization, and reinforcing its moderate Islamic identity. Ultimately, these identity-driven interests guide Indonesia's tangible involvement in Afghanistan, encompassing religious diplomacy, peace initiatives, women's empowerment programs, and collaboration with major Islamic organizations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs qualitative research design with a descriptive-analytical approach. This method is chosen because this research aims to explore the complex phenomenon of identity construction, which cannot be quantified but must be interpreted through the nuances of diplomatic language and policy behavior (Creswell 2014). Furthermore, this article employs library research to compile both primary and secondary data from a variety of credible sources. The data collection is centered on the duration of Jokowi's presidency (2014–2024), particularly highlighting the years 2017–2021, during which Indonesia's involvement in the Afghanistan peacebuilding efforts was at its peak.

This article draws on a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected through written correspondence with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This correspondence provides direct insights into the diplomatic rationale and technical details of the peacebuilding mission that are not publicly available in press releases. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from officials' statements and policy documents on Indonesia's engagement with Afghanistan; publications from NU and Muhammadiyah; reports and press releases on Indonesia's peacebuilding initiatives; and academic works on Indonesia's foreign policy, Islamic diplomacy, and Afghanistan's conflict dynamics. Officials' statements and media publications are considered discursive

materials through which Indonesia constructs and projects its moderate Islam identity. These sources undergo thorough examination and assessment, supplemented by an extensive review of scholarly analyses. This multifaceted methodology guarantees that the representation of state narratives is not taken at face value, but is instead subjected to meticulous scrutiny and interpretation. The collected data is analyzed using discourse analysis. This method was chosen because its objective is to examine how policy texts, speeches, and diplomatic statements construct Indonesia's identity as a moderate Muslim actor. Through discourse analysis, this article attempts to identify the identity narratives, normative frames, and depictive practices that Indonesia uses to explain its involvement in the Afghanistan peacebuilding.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Environmental Structures Context and the Construction of Moderate Islamic Identity

Great Powers Involvement and Militarization of Afghanistan

Afghanistan's protracted conflict constitutes one of the central external structures shaping Indonesia's formulation of a moderate Islamic identity. This analysis highlights the characteristics of the conflict that Indonesia interprets when formulating its foreign policy. The collapse of the Taliban in 2001 momentarily sparked optimism for peace in Afghanistan, attracting various external stakeholders, most notably the United States. From the beginning, the influence of the United States played a crucial role in shaping the political transition, which included the sidelining of the Taliban from the Bonn Conference and the safeguarding of Northern Alliance forces (Suhrke 2018). Over the next two decades, the United States engagement remained

heavily militarized under the War on Terror, limiting progress toward sustainable peace.

Such approach, however, is not without its limitations; Afghanistan's peacebuilding efforts encounter significant challenges. Sedra (2013) highlights key failures in the Afghanistan's security sector reform program, including the prioritization of the United States' interests, reliance on counterinsurgency-focused policing, empowerment of armed groups and warlords, poor understanding of local religious dynamics, illiberal measures, and weak long-term planning. These trends intensified Afghanistan's militarization and undermined efforts to build peace.

Regional powers such as Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran also became deeply involved, often guided by competing strategic interests. Pakistan exemplifies this duality: while supporting diplomatic efforts, it has simultaneously backed the Taliban, partly in response to Kabul's closeness to India (Anugerah and Purba 2021; Dorani 2019). Such rivalries have fueled further militarization and complicated prospects for a stable Afghanistan (Khan 2007; Rehman and Mingjin 2024).

The militarization of Afghanistan affects Indonesia's identity because of the humanitarian issues it causes. Indonesia's concern emerges from the high number of casualties and the influx of Afghan refugees. According to the 2020 UNAMA report, more than 2,000 lives were lost each year due to the conflict (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2021). The militarization also created an immense refugee surge that affected many states, including Indonesia. In 2023, there are 13,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia; most of them are from Afghanistan (Azura and Munir 2023). The growing number of Afghan refugees puts Indonesia in a dilemmatic situation. Indonesia originally does not have any

responsibility for handling refugees because Indonesia has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (Primadasa, Kurnia, and Erawaty 2021). The ratification of these treaties may result in a range of consequences. Teuku Rezasyah, an international relations observer, expressed that the ratification could blowback if the government did not balance it with the country's economic capacity (Suastha 2018). Ratifying both conventions also potentially creates social envy between local citizens and refugees (Suriadi, Kariono, and Purba 2024; Tjahjana, Putranti, and Hanura 2022).

For Indonesia, the continuing crisis in Afghanistan is interpreted as a warning, indicating the ineffectiveness of militaristic solutions and the direct influence of international instability on domestic security. Indonesia saw that the hard-power approach is no longer an effective means of resolving conflicts and establishing peace. Furthermore, Indonesia also believed that the involvement of certain countries has exacerbated the existing conflict. This is evident in Jokowi's critique at the 2017 Arab-Islamic American Summit, where he argued that "military force alone will not be able to defeat terrorism" (President Jokowi Conveys Ideas on Combating Terrorism at the 2017 Arab-Islamic-American Summit). A comparable statement was made by Dr. Arief Rachman, who serves as the Ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia to Afghanistan. He further noted on one occasion that employing a soft-power strategy could effectively "rebalance the hard-power strategy in Afghanistan, a situation that has persisted for at least 40 years" (NU CHANNEL 2021).

The Afghanistan Conflict and the Proliferation of Radical Islamic Groups

Beyond great powers politics, the proliferation of radical Islamic groups creates a hostile "environmental structure"

that directly challenges Indonesia's national identity. Afghanistan has historically served as a critical node in the transnational network of Indonesian extremism, where domestic radicals refined their ideological and combat skills. During the Soviet-Afghan war, cadres from Darul Islam (the predecessor to Jemaah Islamiyah) traveled to Afghanistan not only to assist the Mujahideen, but also to acquire the military capability necessary to conduct revolution at home (Solahudin 2011).

This historical link transformed instability in Kabul into a domestic security crisis for Indonesia. The return of these "Afghan alumni" in the 1990s and early 2000s precipitated a wave of terror attacks, including the Bali Bombings and the Marriott Hotel attacks (Magouirk and Atran 2008; Rahman 2016). These events did more than cause physical damage; they shattered Indonesia's international image as a tolerant, democratic Muslim-majority nation, replacing it with a reputation as a "terrorist hotbed" (Smith 2003). Within the constructivist paradigm, these extremist groups offer a perilous structure that undermines the moderate tenets of Islam in Indonesia. In sharp contrast to the prevailing narrative, they advocate a violent and exclusionary identity. Under Jokowi's administration, this threat has evolved but remains acute. The rise of the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) in Afghanistan presents a renewed risk of ideological spillover. As the Islamic State (IS) in Syria weakened due to sustained United States-led military operations, Afghanistan emerged as an alternative site for regrouping. This change directly impacted Indonesia. The Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict's (2019, 2020) reports indicate an increase in interest among Indonesian IS sympathizers to migrate to Afghanistan, with several individuals already attempting the journey before being apprehended by the Indonesian police.

These situations illustrate that radicalization pressures facing Indonesia are not confined within national borders but are deeply embedded in broader transnational militant networks. Just as the Soviet era radicalized a generation of fighters, the current instability threatens to produce a new wave of foreign terrorist fighters who view Afghanistan as a sanctuary for regrouping. The Directorate for South and Central Asia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (2022) identifies this linkage, noting that "the triumph of any radical group [in Afghanistan] has always been a source of inspiration for radical groups in Indonesia."

Democratic Transition: Domestic Political Contestations and Polarization of Islam

The democratic transition in Indonesia has given rise to a political environment in which Islamic identity has become a site of contention. Contrary to the notion of its origin being attributed to isolated events, the polarization of Islam in Indonesia is revealing a pattern that is inseparably coupled to the dynamics of democratic contestation (Hefner 2002). Electoral processes following the 2014 presidential election have shown an escalating utilization of Islamic symbols, religious imagery, and sectarian rhetoric in the mobilization of political support (Hadiz 2017; Masykuri and Ramadlan 2021). The advent of identity-based campaigns and mass movements signaled a paradigm shift. Islam evolved into a multifaceted social force and a political resource.

The importance of this development is rooted in what is referred to as the fragmentation of Islamic authority. Various competing entities have started to assert their claim over what constitutes "authentic Islam". Besides NU and Muhammadiyah, other groups like the Islamic Defenders Front and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, recognized for their conservative stance,

have emerged. Historically, these organizations have successfully penetrated and taken charge of significant positions across various essential sectors (Nuraniyah 2020; Warburton 2020). In attracting followers, this group brings a rigid culture and tends to be intolerant. This created ideological rifts that challenged the state's traditional position as the moderator of religious life.

The rise of Islamic polarization in the post-2014 also generated visible concerns about national cohesion, social tolerance, and the resilience of Indonesia's pluralistic character. Mietzner, Muhtadi, and Halida's (2018) study revealed that the percentage of Muslims who reject non-Muslim leaders grew between 5-8% after the 2017 Jakarta election. The rising levels of intolerance stressed an environment in which conservative religious narratives gained traction. These indicators are more than just descriptive. They point to a deeper tension: Indonesia's self-image as a tolerant, inclusive nation was gradually challenged from within. In another study, Warburton (2020) described how individuals are excluded because they have different political preferences from the majority in their community.

International interest in Indonesia's internal religious dynamics grew as domestic conflict escalated. After praising Indonesia as a model for moderate Islam, foreign observers started to wonder if the country's reputation was being damaged by growing conservatism. For instance, Varagur's (2017) response to the Basuki Tjahaja Purnama case has been characterized as marking "the downfall of moderate Islam in Indonesia." Emont (2017) also admonished that the rise of conservatism ideologies posed a significant threat to Indonesia's long-standing status as a bastion of moderate Islam. Indonesia perceived these viewpoints as a danger to its image. Thus, the projection of moderate

Islam also turned into an attempt to reaffirm the identity itself.

Identity and Interest Construction

The environmental structure that shapes Indonesia's foreign policy is formed by the dynamics described in the preceding sections: the militarization of Afghanistan by major powers, the transnational spread of radical Islamic ideologies, and the internal contestation that has polarized Islamic identity in Indonesia. Not only do these internal and external forces coexist, but they also work together to strengthen Indonesia's need to present a cohesive religious identity on a global scale. Indonesia gradually resorts to projecting moderate Islam as a stabilizing internal narrative as well as a diplomatic tool overseas in response to humanitarian crises, security spillovers, and domestic fragmentation. Indonesia's identity-based foreign policy, which is covered in this section, emerges from this confluence of forces.

Examining how Indonesia channels its moderate Islamic identity through foreign-policy mechanisms makes the institutionalization of identity-based interests clear. This identity was constructed similarly to those of previous presidents in the Jokowi era. Alles (2016) identifies two pathways that exemplify this process. The first centers on integrating the concerns of Muslims into state diplomacy doctrine. The founding of the Directorate of Information and Public Diplomacy under Hassan Wirajuda exemplifies this approach in practice. This directorate operates as a hub for public diplomacy with global religious actors, promoting Islamic moderation domestically and blurring the boundary between internal identity maintenance and external identity projection (Hoesterey 2018). Through various bilateral and multilateral interfaith dialogues, Indonesia incorporates Islamic

issues into the normative pillars of its long-standing foreign policy doctrine. This demonstrates that identity shapes not only the content of Indonesia's international engagement, but also its diplomatic style.

The second pathway involves the incorporation of major non-state Islamic organizations into foreign-policy processes, consistent with the post-reformation shift toward "total diplomacy." This broadened diplomatic environment acknowledges that religious legitimacy cannot be produced solely by state institutions (Alles 2016). Collaboration with NU and Muhammadiyah thus serves dual purposes: it amplifies Indonesia's credibility in promoting moderate Islam globally while empowering moderate actors domestically (Alles 2016). Their involvement transforms foreign-policy initiatives into platforms for constructing and sustaining a preferred Islamic identity—one that underscores tolerance, pluralism, and democratic compatibility both at home and abroad. In this sense, Indonesia's identity-based objectives serve as guiding principles that influence the planning and execution of its diplomatic initiatives.

Through the aforementioned two approaches, Indonesia has effectively developed a moderate Islamic identity within its foreign policy framework, especially concerning peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. This development is accompanied by a range of interests that have surfaced in response to the previously outlined environmental context. *Firstly*, it aims to provide an alternative method for conflict resolution that does not rely on military strategies, which have been shown to be ineffective in addressing conflicts. Indonesia aspires to participate in the peacebuilding process in Afghanistan through a soft-power strategy. Once peace is attained, certain expectations are set forth. Initially, it is hoped that the conflict in Afghanistan will not devolve into a proxy

war, thereby preventing instability in neighboring regions and globally. Furthermore, there is a possibility of halting the humanitarian crises that impact the entire community, including Indonesia itself. A peaceful Afghanistan can guarantee the welfare of its citizens, ensuring that no more Afghans lose their lives or are compelled to flee to other countries. *Second*, curbing radical ideologies that lead to acts of terrorism. Indonesia aims to prevent the exploitation of regional instability by terrorist groups to conduct attacks in various parts of the world, including Indonesia. Considering Indonesia's historical involvement in the proliferation of radical movements in Afghanistan, as previously discussed, it is not unexpected that Indonesia has expressed its interest in contributing to the process of Afghanistan peacebuilding.

Third, addressing various issues arising from domestic polarization. Indonesia aimed to challenge negative narratives and reaffirm its national identity on the global stage by advocating for moderate Islamic abroad. In this regard, Afghanistan emerged as a pivotal platform for Indonesia to articulate its preferred Islamic identity. The crisis provided Indonesia with an opportunity to exhibit its distinctive Islamic approach, while parallelly distinguishing itself from the increasingly prominent conservative domestic currents. By framing polarization as a threat to national unity, Jokowi elevated moderate Islam as a stabilizing national narrative, one that can symbolically bind diverse electorates and reassert a sense of shared political community. An illustration of this occurrence can be seen in Jokowi's remarks delivered during a gathering with participants of Halaqah Ulama and the leaders of West Java Islamic boarding schools in February 2019.

I remembered two days before I went to Kabul. A bomb went off, causing a hundred

and three-person died and hundreds were injured. Another bomb went off two hours before my plane descended, five more died and dozens were injured. [...] *This is an example that we need to remind ourselves, that we should not, because of political affairs that [...] will continue to exist every five years, lose our brotherhood. It would be a considerable loss if we entered the room earlier because of the politics* [emphasis added] (Humas Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia 2019).

Building Peace in Afghanistan Through Social Reconstruction

Indonesia's peacebuilding initiatives in Afghanistan reflect the enactment of its moderate Islamic identity. These policies illustrate how identity-based interests are translated into concrete diplomatic actions.

Diplomatic Engagement

The diplomatic engagement between Jakarta and Kabul was catalyzed by a shift in the conflict landscape, where military lack of progress necessitated a new form of soft-power intervention. President Ghani and Mohammad Khalili's 2017 request for Indonesian mediation validated Indonesia's status as a moderate Muslim-majority nation (Humas Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia 2017). Jokowi's subsequent visit to Kabul in 2018 applied Indonesia's moderate Islamic identity by committing to peacebuilding, capacity building, and humanitarian assistance—tools designed to address the root causes of conflict (Mosamim et al. 2020).

On May 11, 2018, Indonesia hosted the Trilateral Ulama Conference in Bogor. Scholars from Indonesia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan participated in the conference, which centered around the theme "Islam as *Rahmatan lil 'Alamin*, Peace, and Stability in Afghanistan." This gathering was organized in response to one of the dominant external environmental factors, specifically the militarization of

Afghanistan. The hard-power strategy led by the United States has proven to be ineffective, as evidenced by the failure to perceive the conflict in Afghanistan merely as a War on Terror. This perspective inadvertently reinforced the Taliban's narrative of a "jihad against foreign invaders." (Bassey and Udofia 2023; Idrees 2016). Concurrently, a novel threat has arose in the form of the IS-KP, indicating another failure of the militaristic approach (Ahmadzai 2022). In response to this gap, Indonesia sought to transition the discourse from political contention to theological correction by inviting ulamas. The "Bogor Declaration," which was the result of these efforts, promoted moderate, peaceful, and tolerant Islam, as well as denounced suicide bombings (CNN Indonesia 2018).

Central to this theological correction is the principle of *tawassuth*, a cornerstone of moderate Islam that serves as the antithesis to radical ideology. Defined as an attitude of moderation and balance, *tawassuth* acts as a counter-narrative to *tatharruf* (being extreme or excessive) (Wahab 2019). Within the sociopolitical sphere, this principle demands the rejection of violence as a tool for preaching or political gain. This distinction is critical regarding the Afghanistan conflict, where the spread of unchecked radicalism has undermined international peacebuilding efforts and exacerbated structural violence. Since extremism allows for the weaponization of faith by non-state actors, the Ulama's duty goes beyond religious instruction; they must actively leverage the principle of *tawassuth* to protect society against the radical narratives that precipitate terrorism and suicide attacks.

Indonesia's efforts to establish peace in Afghanistan include all significant parties, including the Taliban. In August 2018, a delegation of Taliban officials led by Mullah Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai visited Indonesia (Popalzai 2018). A year

later, they returned to Indonesia. During the second visit, the Taliban delegation visited the Indonesian Ulema Council and the office of the Central Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (CNN Indonesia 2019b, 2019a).

Jakarta's decision to engage the Taliban directly serves as the projection of its moderate Islamic identity, specifically the constitutive principle of *musawah* (equality). This differentiates Indonesia's strategy from the preceding Western engagement. Historically, Western powers have sidelined the Taliban, most notably at the Bonn Conference. Indonesia, on the other hand, saw this omission as a flaw that fuels conflict. Even if it is not done publicly, by hosting Taliban delegations in 2018 and 2019, Jakarta proposed an inclusive peace process that legitimizes all stakeholders (CNN Indonesia 2019b; Popalzai 2018).

Capacity-Building Programs

To support its commitment to facilitate peace in Afghanistan, Indonesia conducted a series of capacity-building programs for the Afghan people. One of the activities held was training for Afghan diplomats with the title "Indonesia and the Building of Peace Through the Promotion of Tolerance, Pluralism and Democracy: Experiences and Lessons Learned." This training focused on Pancasila, Islam, tolerance, pluralism, democracy and Indonesia's experiences in conflict resolution such as in Aceh and Ambon (Anggoro 2019). Additionally, participants were also exposed to Indonesia's model of religious coexistence through site visits and meetings with local authorities (Farizan and Heryadi 2020). Indonesia also offered scholarships and short-term study opportunities for Afghan students in Indonesian universities. These programs emphasized Islamic moderation, Indonesian society, and peace studies.

Various training programs and education scholarships are not only aimed at developing the capacity of Afghan citizens and building a capable Afghanistan. These programs also serve as a tools to disseminate Indonesia's Islamic identity, a process called identity transmission (Kellerhals, Ferreira, and Perrenoud 2002). Through this, Jakarta seeks to instill the idea of moderate, peaceful, and tolerant Islam among Afghans and foster a new generation of 'agents' who will return to Kabul carrying these ideas, contributing to the societal reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Women Empowerment Programs

Indonesia's capacity-building programs also involve Afghan women. Such involvement is essential considering women are often characterized as a vulnerable group during conflicts (Farizan and Heryadi 2020). For this reason, Indonesia has communicated with Afghan women activists since 2019 to increase their involvement in Afghanistan's peacebuilding efforts. Indonesia's initial contribution was hosting a conference titled "Dialogue on the Role of Women in Building Peace: Women as an Agent of Peace and Prosperity." Following the conference, Indonesia established the Afghanistan Indonesia Women Solidarity Network (AIWSN). AIWSN's successful steps include women's economic empowerment, protection of women, and increasing women's roles, including those of Muslim scholars, in society (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia 2022).

Indonesia's initiative to assist Afghan women operates as a projection of its moderate Islamic identity, one that emphasizes gender equality, justice, and communal welfare as compatible with Islamic values. Through the promotion of women empowerment programs, Indonesia set its interpretation of Islam apart with more restrictive gender norms entrenched

in Afghanistan, where women have long faced limitations in education, employment, mobility, and even access to health care (Zada and Zada 2024). In doing so, Indonesia leverages capacity-building as a strategy to promote an Islamic model that legitimizes women's public participation while concurrently expanding its influence in Muslim-majority environments. This approach also suggests that Indonesia seeks to shape the ideological landscape of Afghanistan's post-conflict reconstruction by demonstrating that Islamic principles can coexist with inclusive social development.

Humanitarian Assistance

Another Indonesia's contribution in the Afghanistan peacebuilding is through the establishment of the Indonesia Islamic Center (IIC), which consists of As-Salam Mosque and the Indonesia-Afghanistan Friendship Clinic. The establishment of the IIC represents the projection of Indonesia's "soft power" strategy, translating diplomatic rhetoric into grassroots reality. By integrating religious education with healthcare services, the IIC implements the concept of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* directly within Afghan society. The IIC functions as a normative bridge designed to transcend ethnic and sectarian fissures (Putri 2020). This serves to validate Jakarta's foreign policy objective of demonstrating that its interpretation of moderate Islam can promote social cohesion in contexts where military interventions have failed (Humas Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia 2018; Santi 2018).

Role of Non-State Actors

Indonesia's peacebuilding strategy distinguishes itself by actively integrating non-state actors like NU and Muhammadiyah to penetrate social layers that may be inaccessible to formal

diplomacy. This measure bears a striking resemblance to Alles' (2016) idea of moderate Islamic construction in Indonesia's foreign policy. The founding of Nahdlatul Ulama Afghanistan (NUA) is one manifestation of this strategy. NUA was founded in 2014 as a strategic tool to institutionalize *tawassuth* values inside the Afghan religious ecosystem. NUA functions as a grassroots norm entrepreneur, opposing extremist narratives with a localized, peace-oriented theology while acting independently and ideologically linked with Jakarta (Farizan and Heryadi 2020; Triono 2021). Furthermore, the introduction of Islam Nusantara during the 2018 ulama meetings represented a deliberate effort to export a theological counter-narrative to the rigid interpretations widespread in Afghanistan (Mu'min et al. 2021).

NU and Muhammadiyah serve as the state's soft power driving force by presenting Indonesian Islamic discourse as a competitive alternative. They use their educational networks, including university scholarships, to raise a new generation of Afghan elites who are indoctrinated into Indonesian democratic values (Mahfudin and Sundrijo 2021). This synergy demonstrates that Indonesia's moderate Islamic identity is a socially rooted reality backed by the nation's biggest religious organizations.

Evaluation of Indonesia's Peacebuilding in Afghanistan

Indonesia's diplomatic engagement in Afghanistan reflects its aspiration to project moderate Islam and contribute to global peacebuilding. While its initiatives generated meaningful religious and societal connections, the overall impact on Afghanistan's political trajectory remained limited. This section evaluates both achievements and constraints to provide a

balanced assessment of Indonesia's approach.

Achievements

Indonesia's primary achievements lie in religious diplomacy, dialogue facilitation, and identity transmission. Together, these efforts have improved Indonesia's reputation as a moderate Islamic leader. Programs such as capacity-building workshops, peace education initiatives, and the establishment of the Indonesian Islamic Center have provided platforms for religious scholars and community leaders to engage with Indonesia's model of moderate Islam. These accomplishments contributed to the expansion of Indonesia's cultural influence and the introduction of Afghan stakeholders to pluralist and non-sectarian interpretations of Islam. Subsequently, NUA's establishment signified the dissemination of Indonesian-style Islamic moderation beyond its national borders (NU Online 2019). Despite its limited reach, NUA constituted a tangible institutional legacy, illustrating how civil-society actors can extend Indonesia's identity projection in conflict-affected contexts.

Furthermore, Indonesia's facilitation of the Trilateral Ulama Conference, which convened clerics from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and three other influential Muslim countries, represented a significant diplomatic achievement. Although the conference did not produce binding political commitments, it fostered dialogue and reduced religious tensions between warring parties in Afghanistan. As Ambassador Rachman said, "the process of peacebuilding or soft power carried out by Indonesia has an impact on all parties" (NU Channel 2021).

Finally, Indonesia's religious-cultural approach has garnered positive international attention. The emphasis on

moderate Islam, humanitarian principles, and non-coercive diplomacy generated soft-power advantages that strengthened Indonesia's profile at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and among Western partners seeking credible moderate Muslim partners (CNN Indonesia 2018; Organization of Islamic Cooperation 2018; United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2018). This acknowledgment also demonstrates that, in the view of the world community, moderate Islam continues to be the predominant form of Islam in Indonesia.

Limitations

Notwithstanding these contributions, Indonesia's initiatives confronted substantial structural, political, and institutional impediments that curtailed their transformative impact. Indonesia's religious and cultural approach did not translate into leverage over the core political dynamics of the Afghanistan conflict, which were driven primarily by factional competition and international intervention. While Indonesia successfully engaged civil society and religious leaders, it lacked access to the armed actors and political elites who shaped Afghanistan's conflict trajectory. As a result, its contributions remained peripheral to the main peace negotiations. This is evident in Indonesia's peripheral role in the 2020 Doha Agreement, where the United States and the Taliban engaged through Qatar's mediation, leaving Indonesia as a ceremonial witness alongside other observers such as Norway, Germany, and Uzbekistan (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia 2020). A similar pattern continued during the 2020-2021 intra-Afghan negotiations, underscoring that Indonesia's contribution struggled to penetrate the formal political structures that ultimately determined the conflict's direction.

Indonesia's efforts to promote moderate Islam abroad have had little effect on religious polarization at home. Although Indonesia promotes moderate Islam abroad, conflicting narratives at home sometimes undermine the cohesion of this projection. This is exacerbated by Jokowi's strategy to quell narratives of conservatism that deepen polarization. His administration continues to classify conservative actors and organizations as political threats (Alvian and Ardhani 2023; Warburton 2020).

Lastly, after the Taliban took control in 2021, several capacity-building initiatives—mostly those aimed at empowering women—were compromised in their ability to continue or grow. This circumstance may offer a rationale for the stagnation of the AIWSN program (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia 2022). Indonesia has consistently expressed its commitment to empowering Afghan women in the field of education in many international venues, such as the Doha Forum and the International Conference on Afghan Women's Education (Adhitama 2022; Kantor Staf Presiden 2023). However, these efforts have not yet produced any significant results.

Overall, Indonesia's engagement in Afghanistan yielded meaningful soft-power gains and expanded networks of moderate Islamic collaboration. However, its impact on political structures and conflict outcomes remained limited due to structural constraints, ideological divergence with the Taliban, and domestic pressures. Recognizing these achievements and limitations offers valuable guidance for designing more adaptive, politically grounded peacebuilding strategies in the future.

CONCLUSION

This study examines Indonesia's engagement in Afghanistan's peacebuilding process as both the construction and projection of a moderate Islamic identity under the Jokowi administration. Drawing on a constructivist framework centered on environmental structures, it argues that this identity emerged in response to three intersecting pressures: intensifying religious polarization at home, the evident failure of military interventions in Afghanistan, and the regional spread of radical Islamic movements that pose security risks to Indonesia.

The results indicate that the identity fulfilled a dual purpose. On an external level, Indonesia addressed a diplomatic void created by the inadequacies of the global "War on Terror," thereby positioning itself as a facilitator that is distinct from Western powers and earning the trust of Afghan actors who are cautious of militarized interventions. Concurrently, the projection of a moderate Islamic image internationally served to mitigate the influence of radical groups that pose a threat to Indonesia's security. On the internal front, Jokowi's dependence on this identity contributed to the stabilization of domestic politics by alleviating concerns regarding escalating social tensions and revitalizing Indonesia's long-standing tradition of Islamic moderation. This was evident in social reconstruction initiatives, including the Trilateral Ulama Conference, scholarships and religious training, the formation of the AIWSN and IIC, and even the hosting of the Taliban based on principles of inclusivity. Theoretically, this study enriches constructivist scholarship by emphasizing that foreign policy identity is neither fixed nor merely inherited; rather, it is continually shaped to navigate complex international and domestic contexts. Practically, the findings suggest that Indonesia's model of "religious soft power"

provides an alternative pathway for conflict resolution in the Muslim world, though its long-term credibility hinges on maintaining coherence between Indonesia's international reputation for moderation and its domestic handling of intolerance. Future research should explore how the Taliban's return to power in 2021 tests the durability of this identity construction and assess whether Indonesia's soft power can adapt to a regime fundamentally at odds with the principles of moderate Islam.

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