

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Indonesia's Position in Asia: Increasing Soft Power and Connectivity through the 2018 Asian Games

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## Abstract

Hosting a sports mega-event strengthens connectivity with the world and provides opportunities to establish or increase networks and to build soft power. These events operate as hubs for the global flow of capital, people, knowledge and technology, and they perform important rituals and symbolic functions. In particular, they become coveted opportunities to enrich the soft power portfolio of governments or individual leaders. Despite its regional character, the Asian Games have developed into such a mega-event. In 2018 – only for the second time in the history of the Asian Games – Indonesia staged the event in Jakarta and Palembang. This paper scrutinises the ways in which Indonesia used or failed to use the Asian Games as a platform to increase the country's soft power and reputation and to strengthen intra-Asian connectivity. Three aspects serve as examples to assess Indonesia's soft power initiatives: (1) the “spirit of 1962”, (2) the host country's emergence on the Asian stage and (3) Indonesia's cooperation with other countries and intra-Asia connections in the context of the sports event. Examining the prominence of domestic politics reveals shortcomings and untapped potential. The analysis shows that the inward-looking foreign policy approach of the Jokowi administration limited the initiatives to increase Indonesian soft power and to establish and address Asian themes and debates; consequently, this approach downgraded the sports event to a tool to generate political capital for domestic affairs.

**Keywords:** Asian Games; sports mega-event; soft power; Indonesia; intra-Asian connectivity

## Introduction

The news hit the headlines after the closing ceremony of the 2018 Asian Games: President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) announced his intention to enter the bidding process for the 2032 Olympic Games with the ambition to make Indonesia the first Southeast Asian host country of the Olympics. The question arises whether this announcement only underlined a boost of Indonesian self-confidence or rather displayed a new perspective of Indonesia's position in Asia and the world. Furthermore, one must consider the ways in which the Asian Games were successful – mainly on the domestic stage to boost Jokowi's election campaign but possibly also with regard to foreign politics, Indonesian soft power and intra-Asian connections.

The (Indonesian) celebration of a successfully staged sports mega-event contrasted with the deep scepticism in the run-up to the Asian Games. From the beginning, the Eighteenth Asian Games in Indonesia seemed to be ill-fated due to an initially lost bid, reduced preparation time, a history of scandals, notorious traffic and air pollution. Perhaps, the doubts about Indonesia's capabilities were the greatest incentive for organisers and participants to prove these voices wrong. Notwithstanding some shortcomings, the Jakarta-Palembang event evoked positive reactions during and after its implementation. Discussions about the event reflected “feel-good nationalism” (Wright 2018) and Indonesian “adrenaline-filled confidence” (Careem 2018).

This paper scrutinises the ways in which Indonesia used the Asian Games as a platform to increase the country's soft power and reputation and to strengthen intra-Asian networks. The analysis relies on the

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concept of soft power for sports events because these events are often connected with concepts of diplomacy, representation and soft power (Grix *et al.* 2015; Pigman and Rofe 2014). The key elements of the discussion on Indonesian soft power initiatives include the three themes that were present during the preparation and the staging of the event: (1) the “spirit of 1962”, (2) Indonesia’s emergence on the Asian stage and (3) the Asian Games as a platform for intra-Asian connections. In contrast to these outward-oriented topics, domestic issues became overarching themes that restricted efforts in Indonesian international relations and lead to shortcomings in a soft power approach. This paper argues that the inward-looking foreign policy approach limited the initiatives to establish and address “Asian” themes and debates and downgraded the sports event to a tool to generate political capital for domestic affairs.

### Sports Mega-events

In the relevant literature, there are several ways of distinguishing between different types of sports events. Hall (1992), Black (2008, 2014) and others differentiate between first-order events – largescale, global competitions such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup – and second- and third-order events. Second-order events are also international, but they have a lower number of participants, for example, the Commonwealth Games. Continental events, such as the Asian Games or the Pan American Games, are often categorised as third-order events (Black 2014: 14). Other scholars follow the definitions of hallmark (Ritchie 1984) or mega-events (Roche 2000) and apply them to sports games. According to Roche (2000), mega-events are “large-scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance... and can therefore be identified as important elements in ‘official’ versions of public culture” (Roche 2000: 1). These events are also characterised by their limited duration and the target to enhance awareness and profitability in the short and long term (Ritchie 1984: 2).

The Asian Games can be described as a third-order event but also as mega-event depending on the emphasis placed to make it a continental or a large-scale event. Giving credit to the increased size of the Asian Games, recent analyses often classify them as mega-events. Müller (2015), for instance, lists the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games as a mega-event by considering four dimensions: visitor attractiveness, mediated reach, cost and transformative impact. His approach helps to classify not the Asian Games per se but, rather, individual events, which indicates that the more recent Asian Games fall under the category of a mega-event.

Although there are far more regional or small-scale events than there are true first-order events, the academic focus rests with the Olympic Games and the World Cup. Whilst, these global events have a greater impact and scope for the host to reach a large audience than smaller or regional events, Black (2014) and Cornelissen (2009) both stress that second- and third-order events also have important distinguishing features that are worthy of examination. Consequently, irrespective of the Asian Games’ categorisation as mega-event or third-order (continental) event, its scope and relevance for the Asian continent make it an attractive tool for governmental, international strategies and soft power ambitions.

### Sports Events, Soft Power and Connectivity

In the arena of international relations, sports are utilised as diplomatic tools, which juxtaposes the idea of sports as a bodily practise for their own intrinsic values (Besnier *et al.* 2018: 230). International sports events, in particular, increasingly serve as a platform for a variety of nations, regions and cities to display their identities, qualities, attractiveness and brands to an international audience (Pigman and Rofe 2014: 1096). Soft power serves as a popular concept to describe and analyse hosting sports mega-events as a tool to act on a global stage. Joseph Nye distinguishes between coercive power to “influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants” (coercive power) and soft power to “attract and co-opt them to want what you want” (Nye 2004: 2). In a globalised world where there is less tolerance for using open force as a political strategy, the use of soft power gains increasing significance (Brannagan and Grix 2019: 253).

Consequently, governments or individual leaders develop strategies of attraction to influence others by displaying attractive cultures, values and policies (Nye 2008: 95). Soft power also surpasses the attempts of

place branding because it aims to entice and attract different audiences based on a country's credibility, leading to acquiescence and imitations in the longer term (Nye 2008; Grix and Brannagan 2016). Thus, leaders need to invest in long-term relationships to establish trust and credibility for establishing government policies, which finally increase the country's soft power (Grix *et al.* 2019: 29).

Against this backdrop, sports mega-events become coveted opportunities to enrich the soft power portfolio of governments or individual leaders. These prestigious events promise a gain in soft power because they include the crucial dimensions of culture, tourism, branding, diplomacy and trade (Grix *et al.* 2019: 30–31). Attempts to gain soft power, however, can go amiss. Strategies in sports and other fields can even have unintended and weakening consequences, leading to what Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018) call “soft disempowerment”. Hosting sports mega-events draws international attention to the specific country, and poor media coverage can thwart the government's goal of image improvement. The sports events, particularly in emerging states, are prepared and held under special observation because (Western) media coverage often focusses on the deficiencies of the hosts' political system and human rights issues (Grix *et al.* 2019; Manzenreiter 2010).

Lee (2017b)<sup>1</sup> introduces a slightly different concept compared to Grix *et al.* (2019). He developed a typology of motivations to show which factors entice country and city governments to bid for sports events. The third type, which Lee calls the soft power model, describes the motivation to demonstrate global social justice. This is often accomplished by organising cultural and sports development programmes. For some bidders, another motivation in the context of the soft power model is to overcome a negative image of a country or city. Lee separates between the emerging state model and soft power model, giving the example of Beijing's 2008 Olympic Summer Games as a “coming out party” for the emerging state of China. This model is characterised by the government's perception of the event as a tool to reinforce the existing (often authoritarian or semi-authoritarian) political structures (Lee 2017b: 480).

Lee's conceptualisations hint to a new group of actors: the emerging states. In recent years, emerging economies have entered the stage of sports mega-events to enhance their agency in global affairs and increase their international prestige. Extant literature most prominently and extensively discusses China, South Africa, Brazil, Russia and Qatar (Grix and Lee 2013; Grix *et al.* 2019). Despite the differences between these countries, their active engagement with mega sports-events as strategic, soft power tools unites them.

As the biggest Southeast Asian country, Indonesia has often been categorised as an emerging economy. Yet, before the 2018 Asian Games, the country showed little interest in top-level sports events, and scholarly work left sports events and sports-related topics in post-Suharto Indonesia mostly untouched. Moreover, the East Asian countries China, South Korea and Japan regularly outshine all other Asian countries on the sporting stage. It is therefore not surprising that the discussion of soft power and sports events has mainly focussed on the East Asian heavyweights and not on Southeast Asia. Accordingly, analysing Indonesia's hosting of the 2018 Asian Games adds a new perspective on the debate regarding sports mega-events taking place in an Asian (emerging) state.

In the Asian context, the concept of soft power seems most adequate for South Korea, and its strategy to link the hosting of sports mega-events with the popularity of Korean pop culture, known as the Korean wave. The 2002 FIFA World Cup in Korea and Japan (Joo *et al.* 2017), the 2014 Asian Games (Lee 2017a) and the 2018 Olympic Games (Rowe and Lee 2018) all related to South Korea's increased popularity on the global stage and its significance in international diplomacy.

Whilst South Korea can be interpreted as an example of a successful increase in soft power through sports, the Chinese case is more complex and controversial. As Brownell (2008) elaborates on the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the continued “China bashing” in the (Western) media undermined attempts to improve China's reputation in the world. The discrepancy between the expectations of increasing soft power and the international responses is even greater in the case of Qatar's sports events ambitions. The mediated public shaming of the designated host of the 2022 FIFA World Cup – regarding perceived immoral and unethical actions – led to a loss of credibility and attractiveness and, consequently, to a soft

<sup>1</sup>The description is partly based on Lee's presentation during the conference “Olympics at Conflict” in Maynooth, June 2016.

disempowerment of the country (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018). Hence, South Korea, China and Qatar exemplify the chances and pitfalls of soft power strategies.

Both the host country and other global players can harness the sports mega-event as a platform for representation. The international nature of these events makes them a meeting point for the global elite, including state actors and leaders of the corporate world (Besnier *et al.* 2018: 253). An increase in connectivity thus occurs on different levels. Scholars have argued that global mega-events, such as the Olympic Games, FIFA World Cups or World Expos, function as hubs for the global flow and presentation of capital, people, knowledge, technology and rituals. The Olympic Movement, Tzanelli (2018: 10), for instance, discusses that mobility is a key element in cultural politics for both the idea and ideal of the Movement. In the history of the Asian Games, the ways of intra-continental connectivity have changed and increased over time as the games have been influenced by geopolitical and economic circumstances. The 2018 Asian Games were the eighteenth iteration of the event whose roots reach back into the early twentieth century.

### History of the Asian Games

The Asian Games have a long history as a platform for international relations, Asian interactions and public performances. Considering the Far Eastern Championship Games (FECG), which began in 1913 as a predecessor of the Asian Games, Asia can claim to have the oldest regional games in the world. As Hübner (2016) describes in detail, the establishment of the Asian Games Federation (AGF) in 1949 marked the beginning of the Asian Games. The Federation decided to hold the multi-sports event every four years between the Olympic Games. The First Asian Games took place in India in 1951. The motto of the Asian Games, “Ever onward”, was considered to express the spirit of the Olympic motto, “Faster. Higher. Braver”, and to emphasise the belief in progress, modernisation, and mutual striving for a better future. The emblem was a full rising sun with eleven interlinked circles that symbolised the then member states. The red sun constituted the symbol for Asia as the “continent of the rising sun” (Hübner 2016: 118) and is still in function to date.

The foundation of the Asian Games Federation (AGF) occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War and at a time of decolonisation and reshaping of Asia. In this transformative period, the Asian Games became a salient symbol of peace, cooperation and an Asian awakening and emergence as a global force. The Asian Games aimed to develop friendship and intercultural knowledge and to strive for unity and fraternity among the participating countries (International Olympic Committee 1966).

Nevertheless, there were also many unanswered questions about ideological positioning, political orientation as well as international and interregional relations. Since their beginning, the Asian Games have been highly politicised. Some countries refused to attend or were blocked from attending (e.g. Pakistan and Israel), leading to the question of how to handle political interference with sports events. The goal of unity did not necessarily include all Asian countries, and political discord regularly undermined the declared solidarity among the member states of the AGF.

In 1951, the Asian Games had a humble beginning because the scope was still limited, considering only eleven countries (including one observer) participated, and there was limited media coverage of the event. Over the last decades, however, the Asian Games have developed into a major, international sports event, and the Asian Games Federation – and since 1982 its successor, the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) – has grown into a considerably large organisation with 45 members, including countries from the Middle East, Central, South, East and Southeast Asia. Thus, in terms of regional sports events, the Asian Games are considered the largest. Yet, some countries that participate in the European games, rather than the Asian Games, are located partially or fully in Asia, such as Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Cyprus, Armenia and Israel.

In addition to the Olympic disciplines, the Asian Games also include indigenous Asian sports that symbolise the continent’s particular sports culture and contribute to a cultural exchange between different cultures and regions within the continent (Xue and Qing 2013: 1045). This combination of Olympic and non-Olympic sports creates a unique event that complies with the Olympic standards but adds an Asian flavour. The overall number of participating athletes is similar to the Olympic Games. At the 2018 event in Indonesia, the number of athletes (11,300) even slightly surpassed those of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

In the history of the Asian Games, East Asian countries have been the most frequent hosts, with South Korea hosting three times and Japan and China both hosting twice. The Southeast Asian host cities were Bangkok (three times), Jakarta (twice), Palembang (once) and Manila (once). In sporting terms, East Asian countries have dominated the Asian Games so far; for instance, Japan and China became the only two nations in history to emerge as overall champions. Japan led the medal table during the first eight events. Then, the 1980s were marked by China's rise to become a sports superpower in Asia (Hong 2007: 83), challenging the prior dominance of Japan. Since 1982, China has continued its winning streak down to the present day.

Since the formation, the Asian Games have been marked by numerous, official efforts to strengthen connectivity and even to construct a pan-Asian identity with the help of the Asian Games emphasising the connecting elements of sports: a meeting point for (young) people and, regarding cultural exchange, the values of fairness and solidarity. These efforts, however, have sometimes been challenged by counter currents because sports events are just as likely to inflame nationalist rivalries and strengthen different sub-regional identities and different ideas and preferences for mega-events. Moreover, sports, which certain states claim as their national games, such as *wushu* (China), *kabbadi* (India) or *pencak silat* (Indonesia, Malaysia) serve to reinforce national identities and compete with each other for inclusion in the mega-event programmes (on *wushu* see Brownell 2012). Thus, the hosting of the Asian Games does not naturally lead to harmonious intra-Asian connections but, rather, can enforce notions of rivalry and demarcation.

### Background of the 2018 Asian Games

The 2018 Asian Games developed from a failed bidding process of Surabaya to the biggest and most prestigious sports event in post-Suharto Indonesia. The event itself as well as the bidding processes and the decision to have two Indonesian host cities, Jakarta and the South Sumatran capital Palembang, are unique features in the history of the Asian Games. The notion of gaining popularity from the symbolic display of national accomplishment on the Asian stage prompted the Indonesian government to support Surabaya's initial bid for the Asian Games. However, it took several detours until the 2018 Jakarta-Palembang Asian Games emerged as the outcome.

In the final round of the bidding process in November 2012, Hanoi beat Surabaya with 29 of 43 votes and was declared the host city of the 2019 Asian Games. Prior to this event, the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) had decided to move the Asian Games to the uneven years between the major sports events of the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. The consequence was to postpone the 2018 event until 2019 and to return to the rhythm of four years. Due to major changes, this plan never materialised.

In April 2014, the Vietnamese capital relinquished its rights to host the Asian Games, and the Olympic Council of Asia was forced to find a new host. Due to the time limitations, the OCA could not begin anew with the bidding process. However, this did not even seem necessary because Indonesia, the most promising candidate, was also the runner-up to the first bid. Yet the city candidate of Indonesia's first bid, Surabaya, was no longer considered,<sup>2</sup> so other cities acquired the host-city status without having led the bidding process. Hence, the normal and highly regulated process to become a host city of the Asian Games was overturned, and the host country was confirmed before the host city. The next step included negotiations for a suitable host city – or cities – and possible venues. The Indonesian Olympic Committee named Jakarta as the main host city and, later, Palembang as the co-host.

As discussed elsewhere (Trotier 2016), being the only viable candidate put Indonesia in a strong position during negotiations with the OCA. Thus, the Indonesian Government was able to not only secure the Asian Games for Indonesia and to nominate two host cities – notwithstanding doubts voiced by the OCA – but also to reschedule the event from 2019 back to 2018. The OCA had to comply with the Indonesian demand to organise the games for 2018 to avoid overlapping with the Indonesian presidential elections in 2019.

The Asian Games were held from 18 August to 2 September, and the opening ceremony took place on 18 August 2018. The date “18/8/18” followed the example of other events with similar arrangements, for example, the Southeast Asian Games ceremony on 11 September 2011 (“11/11/11”) in Palembang. These

<sup>2</sup>After Surabaya's defeat against Hanoi, the city was awarded the 2021 Asian Youth Games. Yet in 2018, the OCA initiated a new bidding process for the event and announced the Chinese city Shantou as the new host in March 2019. Thus, Indonesia's initial candidate came away empty-handed.

types of dates are recognizable and auspicious and thus promising for the organiser. In this case, however, the meaning of the date went beyond mere numerology.

The date 18 August is significant for Indonesia in three different ways. First, it is only one day after Indonesia's national day – the celebration of national independence and sovereignty. To link the opening ceremony of the Asian Games with the proclamation of Indonesian independence in 1945 made a strong case for Indonesian national identity and pride. In a pragmatic way, the beautification with Indonesian flags and pennants for Independence Day produced nice scenery for visitors entering Indonesia for the sports event. Second, 18 August was the foundation date of the first Indonesian constitution, known as the 1945 Constitution. The 1945 Constitution remains a crucial document and institution for the history and conception of the Indonesian state, despite amendments made between 1999 and 2002 (Butt 2014). Third, the Fourth Asian Games in Jakarta also took place in August, and the number eight for August created a link between the first and second time Indonesia hosted this prestigious event in 1962 and 2018, respectively.

### Indonesia's Initiatives for Soft Power and Intra-Asian Connections

Indonesia's hosting of the largest continental sports event drew increased attention to the question of the country's role in Asia and its potential to build soft power and strengthen intra-Asian connections. This section discusses the Indonesian strategies to use the platform of the Asian Games to gain soft power from the symbolic display of national accomplishment and the attempts to increase the connectivity with other Asian countries. Three main themes shaped the Asian Games regarding Indonesia's position in Asia; first, the reliving of the spirit of 1962, and second, Indonesia's re-emergence and coming out party with the help of the successful staging of the event. The latter aspect is closely related to the third aspect: Indonesia's cooperation with other countries and intra-Asia connections in the context of the sports event.

The relatively late decision about the Indonesian host cities suggests that the bidding was foremost a national endeavour, rather than the project of one ambitious city. Furthermore, the Indonesian government played a crucial role in the decision process because the government signalled its serious support for the hosting of the Asian Games and functioned as the patron of the event. Thus, the efforts of the Indonesian government after Vietnam's withdrawal suggest that the sports mega-event served the national interest.

#### *The Spirit of 1962*

One national target for the 2018 Asian Games was to relive the spirit of 1962 – turning the memory of the 1962 Jakarta Asian Games into a soft power tool to convey a positive and strong image of Indonesia. To establish a success story for the Asian Games and to demonstrate Indonesia's significance on the Asian sports stage, it was important to convey Indonesia as a country with a sport history, which followed the idea that, in today's world, having a distinctive sport history is a mark of a modern nation and serves national prestige (Brownell 2008: 40). Therefore, implementing an international event as early as the 1960s could be used to distinguish Indonesia from other (post-colonial) countries. Several platforms served the reliving of the spirit of 1962, most prominently the logo, the opening ceremony and several landmarks in Jakarta.

The 1962 Asian Games were a highly politicised event because President Sukarno displayed his leadership ambitions in Indonesia and on the international stage. He even intended to turn the Asian Games into the sports event of the Non-Aligned Movement (Hübner 2016: 182–183). This goal was related to Sukarno's idea of truly representing the "Bandung spirit" (Lutan and Hong 2007: 28). This spirit in the memory of the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung united two salient elements: the symbolic moment of decolonisation and the beginning of a new era of international politics with Asian and African countries becoming new and powerful allies (Shimazu 2014: 227–228). Accordingly, Sukarno intended to use the symbolic power of the Bandung Conference as a fixed star for the Asian Games and to increase Indonesia's and his own position in international politics.

The official memory of 1962 acknowledged and even celebrated this leadership role of Sukarno and Indonesia in Asia and the Non-Aligned Movement. Indonesia's politically motivated move to exclude



Figure 1. The logo of the 2018 Asian Games, Copyright: ©Olympic Council of Asia<sup>10</sup>

Israel and Taiwan from the sports event (Lutan and Hong 2007: 22) and the increasing confrontation with the Western powers led to Indonesia's isolation on the international sporting stage and to its exclusion from the International Olympic Committee (IOC); however, these consequences were glossed over in the recount of the Fourth Asian Games in 2018.

The spirit of 1962 established a personality cult around President Sukarno. His new statue on the Senayan sports complex in Jakarta was not only a popular photo (and selfie) spot but also the centre of activities during the Eighteenth Asian Games, which were situated in the square where people gathered to follow the on-screen broadcasting of competitions. Furthermore, Sukarno functioned as a role model for Indonesian politicians, primarily President Jokowi and the then Governor of South Sumatra, Alex Noerdin. Several exhibitions about the Asian Games especially linked Sukarno and Jokowi to infrastructure projects in Jakarta. Jokowi's attempt to mobilise the Indonesian population with the mega-event and to become a key actor of the opening ceremony is reminiscent of Sukarno's sports policy before and during the 1962 Asian Games. Alex Noerdin voiced his admiration for Sukarno's tendency towards big dreams and big projects and proposed similarly long-term plans for the sports complex and infrastructure projects in Palembang (Deryardli 2015a).

The reliving of the spirit of 1962 was a key part of the opening ceremony of the 2018 Asian Games in the Bung Karno Stadium in Jakarta. At the beginning of the show, a film recording from the 1962 opening ceremony was screened. Thus, the 2018 Asian Games were conveyed as in direct lineage to the 1962 event, which emphasised Indonesia's sport history and long-term capacity of hosting the Asian Games.

A manifestation of the spirit of 1962 was the logo of the 2018 Asian Games (Figure 1), which was an abstract version of the Bung Karno Stadium from an aerial view. When it was built and inaugurated for the 1962 Asian Games, this stadium embodied Jakarta's new image as a centre of Asian power in the world (Pour 2004). Thus, having the Bung Karno Stadium featured in the 2018 logo stressed the importance of the stadium as a national symbol and an icon of Jakarta's development to a modern city connecting it with Indonesia's current striving for further progress and development.

The proud demonstration of the 1962 legacy is still visible in Jakarta – such as the Gelora Bung Karno Stadium, the Sarinah department store, the Welcome Monument, Hotel Indonesia and the Semanggi Interchange – supported Indonesia's claim to be able to stage an event with a similar, long legacy. Although Jakarta was unable to finish the long expected mass rapid transport system (MRT) in time for the Asian Games, Palembang managed to open the new light rail transit system (LRT) for the event, and both host cities had new infrastructure projects with the promise of a legacy beyond the Asian Games. Thus, the link to 1962 shed a positive light on the organisers of the 2018 event.

Another aspect of the spirit of 1962 was the sporting success of Indonesian athletes because, in 1962, Indonesian athletes had surpassed all expectations and secured second place on the medal board. This was not a realistic target for the 2018 event. Nevertheless, Indonesia, as the host, was under pressure to improve the performances of Indonesian athletes compared to recent international events and to terminate the seemingly endless series of scandals related to sports in the country (Affan 2017). Hence, the

repeated mentioning of the sporting success in the form of medals during the Fourth Asian Games underlined the necessity to generate good results in the 2018 event. This target was met with the Indonesian athletes securing the fourth position after the heavyweights – China, Japan and South Korea. The successes of Indonesian athletes not only pushed the confidence of the host nation but also increased the international respect toward the country and its athletes.

In summary, the spirit of 1962 supported a restricted memory of the Fourth Asian Games – focusing on President Sukarno as a charismatic leader and on the fact that Indonesia had already hosted the Asian Games in the 1960s and thus could claim a national sport history. Despite being uncritical, the rather unpolitical perspective on the Fourth Asian Games made the message of the spirit of 1962 compatible with the narrative of the Asian Games as a platform to bring Asia together and to display Indonesia as a capable host with a far-reaching history related to the Asian Games.

### *Emergence on the Asian Stage*

“See you at the Olympics” was a greeting after the closing ceremony at the Gelora Bung Karno Stadium, demonstrating the positive perception on the performance of the Indonesian organisers, athletes and volunteers. The event produced moments of Indonesian successes – medals, cultural demonstrations and hospitality – that were reminiscent of China’s and Russia’s celebration of re-emergence at the Olympic Games in 2008 and 2014, respectively. The Asian Games mirrored Indonesia’s announcement of its arrival on the world stage. Moving from the Asian Games, as a regional mega-event, to the prospect (or dream) of hosting the Olympic Games – the global mega-event – underlined Indonesia’s ambition to perform in the global arena.

The coming-out party on the Asian stage followed a similar pattern of Indonesia’s hosting of the 2011 Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games). As the 2011 SEA Games coincided with Indonesia’s ASEAN chairmanship, the leaders of the country saw 2011 as the year of Indonesia’s national re-emergence (Creak 2014: 860) and positioning as the region’s leader – after the years of turmoil following the fall of Suharto. The sporting success of Indonesian athletes underlined this ambition. Indonesia led the medal board, which was particularly important for the country because the previous years of Indonesian athletic dominance of the SEA Games, prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s, had ended in 1999. Its home victory in 2011 boosted Indonesian self-confidence and generated hopes for continued Indonesian dominance of the SEA Games.

In 2018, the Asian Games coincided with the government’s announcement to prioritise the ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific region in foreign policy, aiming to strengthen the unity of the ASEAN countries and to promote the peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region (Sheany 2018). Besides the Asian Games, Indonesia also hosted the Our Ocean Conference, IMF-World Bank Annual Meeting or the World Conference on Creative Economy in 2018 (Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018) and thus provided a stage for international meetings of geopolitical importance.

The Asian Games served as a platform to demonstrate Indonesian emergence in Asia. This idea of a “coming out party” was most visible during the opening ceremony when the country presented its diverse cultures and provided a sparkling show. The international press specifically celebrated the opening ceremony as “spectacular” (Straits Times 2018<sup>3</sup>) and “explosive” (Times of India 2018<sup>4</sup>). It included cultural performances, such as dances and music from the archipelago, in an Indonesian “natural setting” because the stage had the shape of a towering volcano with a waterfall surrounded by rain forest. Thus, the Indonesian organisers used the public stage to present the country as having diverse cultures and exotic vegetation in a well-received manner. The opening as well as the closing ceremonies lived up to the high expectations placed in sports mega-events and contributed to the positive assessment of the host and a possible increase in Indonesia’s soft power related to the country’s cultural and natural assets.

The already mentioned high medal score of Indonesian athletes further contributed to the hosting success of the archipelago state. Two sports were the guarantee for Indonesian success: the martial art *pencak silat* and badminton. *Pencak silat* was one of the new sports, and introducing it to the 2018 Asian Games turned out to be a goldmine for the host country. Comparable to the situation when *pencak silat* entered

<sup>3</sup><https://www.straitstimes.com/sport/asian-games-indonesia-welcomes-continent-for-18th-asiad-with-spectacular-opening-ceremony>

<sup>4</sup><https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/sports/asian-games/asian-games-2018-begin-with-explosive-opening-ceremony-in-jakarta/articleshow/65454521.cms>



the Southeast Asian Games in 1987 and contributed to Indonesia's domination of the event (Wilson 2015: 25), the Indonesian martial art helped the host country to boost the winning of medals. In sixteen competitions, Indonesian athletes won fourteen gold medals, clearly dominating the event. The other sport to generate Indonesian medals and dramatic stories was badminton (two gold, two silver, four bronze medals), which once more proved to be Indonesia's most successful sport. Although medals from non-Olympic sports contributed significantly to Indonesia's high medal score, the fourth position on the medal table supported the image of an emerging country on the Asian sports stage.

### *Intra-Asian Connections*

The Indonesian demonstration of a sport history and the national emergence on the Asian sporting stage contributed to increased recognition of the host country's capabilities. The focus on Indonesia alone, however, is not sufficient in an extensive soft power approach. Rather, the relationship with other countries through stronger networks of connectivity influenced Indonesia's position in Asia.

Furthermore, the Asian Games in Indonesia shed light on cooperation in the sectors of infrastructure, knowledge transfer and entertainment. In the lead-up to the event, there were several announcements of cooperation between Indonesia and other Asian countries, mainly from East Asia. For the security system, Japan assisted the Indonesian organisers as a part of a larger cooperation in counter-terrorism (CNC News 2018<sup>5</sup>). Further technical assistance came from Japanese companies working in Indonesia such as Panasonic, Canon Inc. and Otsuka Pharmaceutical (Purwanto 2018). Japan's involvement in the Indonesian Asian Games also occurred with the expectation of hosting the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo,<sup>6</sup> where many cooperation partners would be needed.

In May 2018, the governments of China and Indonesia issued a joint statement, which displayed the targets to cooperate in key areas of trade, infrastructure, investment, industry and financing. The target to increase exchanges in the sectors of education, culture, tourism, media and sports included Chinese promises to support Indonesia in the preparations for the Asian Games (Xinhua 2018). Yet, the governments gave no details. In contrast to Japanese partners, who also targeted future cooperation during the Tokyo Olympics, China seemed less interested in including Indonesia in the preparation of the 2022 Asian Games. Rather, the Hangzhou Asian Games delegation engaged in dialogues with experts from Incheon (Hangzhou Daily 2017<sup>7</sup>), perhaps considering South Korea more experienced in hosting mega-events than Indonesia.

South Korea and Indonesia fostered cooperation, especially regarding people-to-people exchanges. Aware of the popularity of K-Pop in Indonesia, the host country of the Asian Games looked for Korean support in the entertainment sector. This included inviting Korean K-Pop bands to perform in Indonesia and support the marketing of the Asian Games (Laksamana 2017). South Korea was further perceived as a promising partner in different sectors. For instance, in 2015, South Sumatra's Governor Alex Noerdin, succeeded in formalising a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Incheon Asian Games Organizing Committee (IAGOC) and South Sumatra (Deryardli 2015b) to profit from the knowledge transfer while organising a mega-event. In the business sector, a specific agreement with the sponsor Samsung aimed to increase the attractiveness of the province South Sumatra – for job seekers as well as other companies. Moreover, prior to the Asian Games, the Indonesian organisers announced the collaboration among Indonesian and Asian artists to promote Indonesia's cultures combined with the latest technologies to contribute to the opening and closing ceremonies (Singh 2017).

The Jakarta-Palembang Asian Games promoted ideas of unity and peace among Asian nations. Under this premise, the event had the prospect to serve as a tool to ease tensions between various countries. The 2018 Asian Games brought together 45 countries, some of which were and still are in the middle of protracted conflicts in the form of civil wars, border and sovereignty disputes and long-term wars (Utomo 2018). The absence of major public disputes and conflicts during the event boosted Indonesia's image as a capable, prudent and reliable host country. Thus, the smooth implementation of the sports event can be assessed as a successful intra-Asian cooperation. Yet, one could witness not only the absence of displayed animosities but

<sup>5</sup>[http://en.cncnews.cn/news/v\\_show/72405\\_Japanese\\_security\\_system\\_for\\_Asian\\_games.shtml](http://en.cncnews.cn/news/v_show/72405_Japanese_security_system_for_Asian_games.shtml)

<sup>6</sup>The 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games had to be postponed to 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.hangzhou2022.cn/2022yyhEn/presscenter/preparationprogress/201712/t20171215\\_1151.shtml](http://www.hangzhou2022.cn/2022yyhEn/presscenter/preparationprogress/201712/t20171215_1151.shtml)

also active moves of diplomacy and reconciliation in the preparation for and during the Asian Games, which helped the host country to strengthen its role as a mediator and to foster a hospitable image.

In the past, crises have thwarted cooperation between Southeast Asian countries, especially between Indonesia at its neighbours Malaysia and, to a lesser degree, Singapore. A diplomatic strategy to improve relations and enhance pan-Asian ideas was to emphasise the common culture and history of these countries and to address controversies over issues such as the “possession” of batik as a cultural heritage, the conditions of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia and the issue of haze in diplomatic ways (Clark and Pietsch 2014). One first step was taken concerning the last aspect. In recent years, the burning of forests in Indonesia had let relations with Malaysia and Singapore fall into crisis. In the lead-up to the Asian Games, President Jokowi made an official statement about prohibiting the burning of forests and fields and making a pledge for a haze-free year (Vatvani 2018). This acted as a diplomatic move toward the neighbouring countries to demonstrate a commitment to common values and to stress peaceful intra-Asian connections. Except for one occasion, when a grass fire started near the athletes’ village in Palembang (Hendrawan 2018), Indonesia could contain the danger of large-scale forest and peatland fires in the dry season when the event took place. Consequently, controversies related to haze did not hamper the Asian Games.

The Indonesian Asian Games further contributed to improved relations between other Asian countries. Already, in the lead up to the event, a positive sign of peace came from the two Koreas as both nations decided to march under the unified peninsula flag, which had been used before during sports events. Moreover, the Koreas even discussed and agreed upon combining teams to compete in the games (Macdonald 2018). Furthermore, the Indonesian government decided to contribute to the positive sign of peace on the Korean peninsula and invited both the South and North Korean president to attend the event (Kuwado 2018). Thus, Indonesia fostered cooperation and peace, and the government used the Asian Games to demonstrate its position as a mediator in Asian political affairs.

This role as mediator supported Indonesia’s frequent, active participation to manage and ease disputes or crises, particularly in the context of the ASEAN (Roberts and Widyaningsih 2015: 277). Since the Yudhoyono presidency, these diplomatic moves formed a strategy to highlight Indonesia’s soft power as a capable mediator in Asian conflicts. The interaction with the two Koreas exemplified Indonesia’s expansion of its peacebuilding activities in the context of the 2018 Asian Games. This diplomatic move combined the Indonesian initiative to strengthen the country’s soft power portfolio and to secure peaceful, intra-Asian connections.

### Indonesia’s Domestic Issues and Soft Power Limitations

The positive aspects and examples of representation and connectivity should not blind us to the fact that Indonesia wasted its chances of pursuing soft power and increasing intra-Asian connectivity. This was mainly due to the dominance of domestic affairs and the resulting prioritisation of Indonesian over Asian topics. The forthcoming presidential election was the strongest factor that directed the attention to Indonesian domestic issues. In addition, shortcomings in producing a strong and coherent portrayal of Indonesia as an “inside” obstacle and natural disasters as an “outside” force contributed to the limited attention paid to foreign policy affairs.

From the moment when Indonesia re-entered the bidding process for the Eighteenth Asian Games in 2014, domestic interests guided decision-making processes, as demonstrated by the effort needed to reschedule the sports event from 2019 to 2018. The wish to avoid the Asian Games overlapping the presidential elections in Indonesia hinted to the utility of the sports event for the election campaigns. Thus, the domestic issues outshined other topics, which would have increased the potential of the Asian Games for Indonesia’s soft power and position in Asia. The event was from Indonesians for Indonesians – resulting in feel-good nationalism with a limited scope for regional topics, due to the strong focus on domestic politics.

The Asian Games preceded the presidential elections by approximately eight months, turning the event temporarily into a platform for election campaigns. The two candidates Jokowi and Prabowo Subianto were both central figures during the event. Prabowo Subianto, a long-time patron of Indonesian *pencak silat* (Mason 2016: 240), took centre stage at this popular sport. Jokowi as the incumbent president, however, was in the lead and one of the winners of the sports event – at least in domestic terms.

During the lead-up, Jokowi had already demonstrated a strong commitment to the Asian Games, linking the outcomes of the event to his own person. He oversaw numerous infrastructure projects in Jakarta and visited the co-host Palembang. Moreover, he opened several new venues, most prominently the newly renovated Bung Karno Stadium in Jakarta. Giving priority to the Asian Games over other aspects of the political agenda underlined Jokowi's commitment and conveyed the message of maintaining control. The infrastructure projects linked to the Asian Games fit Jokowi's policy of new developmentalism (Warburton 2016).

The open and closing ceremonies provided a stage for Jokowi's performances with the national audience as the main addressee. The Indonesian president conveyed strong messages during the ceremonies in quite different ways. Whilst his performance at the opening ceremony stressed his "cool credentials" because he took centre stage in the performance, his video message during the closing ceremony – showing him among disaster victims in Lombok – underlined his characteristics, such as concern, sympathy and supportiveness. Both ceremonies helped to boost Jokowi's success as the host of the sports event and the candidate to be re-elected in the 2019 elections.

During the opening ceremony in Jakarta's Bung Karno Stadium, Jokowi could manifest his image as a casual and cool leader, who is close to the people and a successful representative of the country. His demeanour triggered enormous cheers, especially at the moment when he was grooving to the music of an Indonesian pop star. Regarding his election campaign, Jokowi could reach Indonesian millennials with his performance, which made him look young and reckless but still committed to his tasks.

During the closing ceremony, Jokowi was able to demonstrate other crucial attitudes of a successful president. Notwithstanding his absence at the ceremony, the Indonesian president could position himself as a caring leader for the whole country. Jokowi sent his video message to the spectators in the stadium from Lombok, who had suffered from the aftermath of an earthquake shortly before the Asian Games. Hence, the closing ceremony became a platform to underline Jokowi's concern and commitment to the victims of the natural disaster. His support for the people of Lombok showed his sense of responsibility for all Indonesians, not just in the moments of triumph (opening ceremony) but even more in situations of loss and sorrow. The successful implementation of the Asian Games was certainly not the only argument to vote for Jokowi, but the event likely helped Jokowi to strengthen his image and to convince people about his capabilities as the country's leader (Trotier forthcoming).

Notwithstanding Jokowi's raise of profile on the national stage, his performances also mirrored his reluctance to play the international card in the Asian arena. His show and messages were aimed at the Indonesian population and – only to a lesser degree – at the Asian audience. The intended use of the Asian Games as a platform for his election campaign undermined Jokowi's credentials to advance Indonesia's position in Asia. This inward-looking approach aligned with Jokowi's overall limited commitment to foreign policy. In contrast to his predecessor Yudhoyono, who frequented international events and forums, Jokowi showed less enthusiasm about trade and foreign affairs in his presidency (Patunru 2019: 164). For instance, his decision to skip the UN Assembly for five years (Purba 2019) marks him as an inward-looking politician. The hosting of the Asian Games and the position as a non-permanent member of the United States Security Council between 2018 and 2020 show remarkable similarities in terms of unused opportunities.

Considering that the establishment and expansion of a soft power portfolio via sports requires considerable time and governmental efforts, as demonstrated by the prominent examples of Japan and South Korea, which started to promote their cultural industries in the 1990s (Besnier *et al.* 2018: 253), Indonesia's efforts seemed short-termed and half-hearted. The reduced preparation time between 2014 and 2018 further limited the chances of making the Asian Games an asset in a soft power strategy to strengthen Indonesia's position in Asia. The event's slogan and the avoidance to establish Islam as a theme for the event serve as examples of not only the shortcomings but also the complexity of an Indonesian soft power approach to the games.

The event's slogan, "Energy of Asia", promised to display Indonesia's ideas about the continent and its own perceived position. The content of the slogan, however, remained rather vague and inward-looking. Indonesia explicitly aimed to choose a slogan that would include all of Asia and not single out certain countries or ethnic groups (Kemenpora 2016). Yet, this was so basic that including "Asia" in the slogan already fulfilled the target. The explanation of the slogan given by the official website of the event

remained vague because it stated that “[t]he Energy of Asia lies in the diversity of its [sic] culture, heritage, and legacy. When all these elements come together, they will be a major force to reckon in the world” (Official website of the Jakarta-Palembang Asian Games 2018<sup>8</sup>). Only when referring to Indonesia does this statement become a bit clearer in the suggestion that Indonesia’s diversity will drive the country to attain a key global power status. Still, this focus on Indonesia does not reveal much about the country’s position in relation to Asia, except for the country’s ambition to increase its influence on the international stage. Even this statement appears to remain a mere lip service considering President Jokowi’s limited interest in foreign policy affairs discussed earlier.

The media coverage of the games and official addresses during the opening and closing ceremonies celebrated the “Energy of Asia”, but likewise, they did not specify the idea behind the slogan except for marking Asia as a place of dynamics and competitions.<sup>9</sup> The Indonesian government and the organisers of the 2018 Asian Games missed the opportunity to develop the theme of energy into a debate of global relevance about renewable, green and sustainable energy. Indonesia could have claimed a new leading role by putting this theme on the agenda of the Asian Games.

In preparing for the event, some initiatives had the potential to become a narrative of green energy for the Asian Games. For instance, organisers in Palembang aimed to turn the Jakabaring Sport City into a green and smart sports complex, which included introducing LED technology. This was part of a city marketing strategy (Trotier forthcoming), but it could have served as a starting point for a narrative about Indonesia’s green energy efforts. Making the Asian Games a paper-free endeavour could have fit nicely into the narrative of green and smart games. Moreover, Jokowi’s pledge for a haze-free year could have been used to advance forest protection and advertise Indonesia as a country committed to sustainability and renewable energy sources. These potentials to breathe life into the slogan of “Energy of Asia” were largely left untapped.

An observer of the *Indian Express* (Naik 2018) expressed her admiration for the naturalness of Indonesian, female athletes and supporters wearing headscarves in the multi-religious sports settings. As the most populous Muslim country in the world, Indonesia could have harnessed the potential from the visibility of a moderate Islam during the sports event for the country’s soft power – strengthening the perception of Indonesia as a role model for other Muslim-majority countries. More than 60 per cent of the global Muslim population live in Asia (Basit 2012: 3), and most of the participating countries of the Asian Games have at least partly a Muslim population. Although the Asian Games are clearly based on a regional concept and not on religious affiliation, like the Islamic Solidarity Games (see Trotier 2015), the host country can frame the event and introduce specific topics. Consequently, Indonesia had the opportunity to cultivate an image of being the home of a moderate Islam and an example of peaceful coexistence of people adhering to different faiths.

Considering Grix *et al.*’s (2019) emphasis on soft power’s key characteristic of being a long-term project that must establish trust and credibility, the display of a specific Indonesian form of a moderate Islam was already used in the previous years and could be followed. For instance, under President Yudhoyono, Indonesia’s foreign policy developed the soft power target to establish the country as a model of a modern, democratic and moderate Muslim-majority country (Alexandra 2017: 44). The Yudhoyono government (2004–2014), the moderate Islamic social movements Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah and transnational Islamic actors advocated this image of Indonesia on different platforms and at different occasions, which can be identified as a soft power approach (Allès 2016: 145).

The organisers of the Asian Games, however, refrained from actively bringing the issue of Islam to the foreground. During the ceremonies, Islam was present in the display of Indonesia’s different cultures but was not prioritised. The Indonesian government neither established Indonesian moderate Islam as a main theme of an Indonesian soft power approach nor developed strategies to strengthen the connectivity between Muslim countries in Asia through the sports event. The image used to promote Indonesia to the world remained rather vague, describing the “greatness in maintaining harmony among various religions and different ethnic groups, hospitality and rich culture” (INASGOC 2017).

<sup>8</sup><https://en.asiangames2018.id/about/mascots>

<sup>9</sup>The remark about Asia as dynamic and competitive was part of the speech given by Erick Thohir, the head of Indonesia’s organising committee, during the opening ceremony.

Presumably, the domestic circumstances prevented or limited Indonesian initiatives to harness the potential of promoting a moderate Islam on the Asian stage. In recent years, identity politics have led to an increased polarisation of the Indonesian society, which is most visible from the case of the blasphemy conviction of the then Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known as Ahok) in 2017 (Berenschot 2017). The identity split between Islamists and pluralists shaped the presidential election campaigns (Aspinall and Mietzner 2019: 108) turning the topic of Islam into a political minefield for Jokowi and his administration. Moreover, during his first term of office, Jokowi faced accusations of being anti-Islam (Wanto and Sebastian 2019), which obstructed any plans to make Islam an important topic of his presidency. Consequently, actors (other than Jokowi) and his ministers took charge of the international representation of Indonesian Islam (Allès 2016).

Because the preparation period for the Asian Games coincided with Jokowi's first term, these developments influenced decisions on the framing of the sports event. Jokowi's stigma as anti-Islam as well as the crucial role of Islam in the identity politics of the Jakarta elections were probably decisive for discarding the idea of establishing an image of Indonesian Islam as a soft power tool for the Asian Games.

Another factor to direct the attention to Indonesian domestic issues was not related to political decisions but to natural forces. In summer and autumn 2018, natural disasters hit Indonesia, a country highly vulnerable to natural hazards (Siagian *et al.* 2014). Only a few weeks prior to the Asian Games, a series of earthquakes struck the island Lombok with a high number of casualties and displaced people. Even more devastating were the multiple earthquakes and an ensuing tsunami, which destroyed parts of northern Sulawesi between 28 September and 1 October (Renaldi and Shelton 2018). Although they did not occur at the same time as the sports events, these disasters diverted attention away from the Asian Games and the following Para-Asian Games (6–13 October). To a certain degree, the struggle of the victims and the need for disaster relief appeared as more imminent problems than soft power targets of the Asian Games.

### Success or Failure? Indonesia's Asian Games, Soft Power and Position in Asia

The question of whether the 2018 Asian Games changed Indonesia's position in Asia and increased the country's soft power reveals a complex interplay of different aspects. The concepts of soft power and bidding motivations provide a basis to evaluate initiatives and actions of the Indonesian decision-makers. To describe the incentive to host the Asian Games after Vietnam's withdrawal in 2014, Lee's (2017b) concept of an emerging state model seems most apt because it highlights the motivation to reinforce the existing political structures and to celebrate a "coming-out party" on the international stage. As the newly elected president, Jokowi saw the utility of the sports mega-event for his first term in office and a potential re-election in 2019. This could be combined with promoting Indonesia as an emerging country by turning the sports event into a coming-out party.

Because establishing a soft power portfolio means developing strategies of attraction to influence others by displaying attractive cultures, values and policies (Nye 2008), Indonesia's staging of the Asian Games had some potential and successes. The smooth implementation of the mega-event and the high position on the medal board increased Indonesia's reputation regarding policies, administration and commitment, especially considering the relatively short preparation time and the previous performances of Indonesian athletes. The demonstration of Indonesian sport history through the spirit of 1962, the impressive ceremonies (representing Indonesia's cultural richness and diversity) and the symbolic acts of peaceful interactions (e.g. the joint Korean teams), further underlined the host country's attractiveness of cultures and values. Indonesia could present itself as a capable host and as a mediator in Asian political affairs. The event produced mostly positive news coverage recognising the collective efforts of organisers, volunteers and the public in the two host cities. These aspects boosted Indonesia's attractiveness and recognition in the Asian arena.

Despite these promising moves to use the Asian Games as a platform to strengthen the country's soft power as well as intra-Asian networks and cooperation, the Indonesian organisers missed further opportunities, especially in the arena of soft power. Although the shortcomings of a soft power approach did not result in a soft disempowerment, the Indonesian decision-makers still fell short of the targets to gain soft power and to play a leading role in stimulating debates and in establishing and advancing decisive

topics for the Asian continent. The Jokowi administration failed to generate an Asian-Games-driven soft power strategy, which would surpass the attempts of place branding. Rather, it seemed to have stopped at the level of branding and deriving political capital for domestic affairs.

The discrepancy between a potential long-term increase of Indonesia's soft power and the real outcome of the 2018 Asian Games becomes apparent in the statement that "Indonesia's hosting of the Asian Games did little to hurt the country's international profile" (Almuttaqi 2020: 117). It might be sufficient for a positive assessment of a sports event to say the Asian Games did not harm Indonesia's international status. To advance a soft power strategy, however, such a conclusion is rather a setback for a nation that regularly targets the status of a middle power and a recognised role in the Asia-Pacific region.

There is little evidence of Indonesian aspirations to make the Asian Games a pillar of a soft power strategy, which genuinely targets different audiences by enticing and attracting them based on the country's credibility. The topics with soft power potential, such as the Indonesian model character of a modern, democratic and Muslim-majority country or Indonesia's efforts and creative ideas in the sector of renewable energy remained largely untapped. This suggests that the Jokowi administration, during his first term in office, lacked both a clear idea and future-oriented ambitions to secure a strategic global standing for the country. The hosting of a sports mega-event was thus largely downgraded to an endeavour in the context of domestic political interest. The 2018 Asian Games did not move beyond the status of an event designed by Indonesians for Indonesians.

The Jakarta-Palembang games confirmed the inward-looking policy of the Jokowi government, whose foreign policy decisions have often focused on the short-term gain of domestic political interest. It followed the tendency to prioritise domestic over foreign policy issues, which has also been present in the orientation of foreign trade during the Jokowi presidency (Hill and Negara 2019: 20). The presidential election campaign particularly dwarfed other potentials of the sports event beyond the Indonesian national borders. President Jokowi took advantage of the prestigious sports event as a valuable political capital on his way to his second term in office. Consequently, he refrained from clear, Asia-focused commitments that went beyond mere lip service.

The dominance of domestic issues – foremost, the presidential elections – influenced the Asian Games and limited Indonesia's efforts in foreign policy with decisive consequences for Indonesia's future foreign policy and position in Asia. The focus on short-term gains might cause the respect generated from the smooth staging of the sports event to quickly fade. In the bigger picture of Indonesia's foreign policy and the country's position in Asia, the limited efforts for a soft power strategy might lead to a decrease – instead of an increase – in credibility in the long term.

On the sporting stage, the Indonesian medals and the rapprochement with the East Asian heavyweights might prove short-lived. The next Olympic and Asian Games until 2024 and 2026 respectively will all be held in Japan and China. Using sports as a tool to diversify and boost a soft power portfolio seems more demanding for Indonesia in the aftermath of the Asian Games. If Indonesia does not implement a long-term strategy to organise and finance elite sports, particularly Olympic disciplines, the high medal score of the 2018 Asian Games will soon be history and considered as a nine days' wonder due to the home advantage. A bid for the 2032 Olympic Games could trigger these long-term efforts. Yet, it is questionable how far the Jokowi administration and a potential successor to the office of president will seriously pursue the target to make Indonesia the first Southeast Asian host of the Olympic Games.

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