

# **Navigating Between the Two Reefs: Indonesian Media and Government Representation of China and the United States**

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Between Scylla and Charybdis: Is there a Middle Path for Middle Powers in the Indo-Pacific  
Region?

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**Abstract:** This article examines how China and the United States' relations with Indonesia, a middle power, are represented in the Indonesian national media and government official statements through a content analysis of materials from 2015-2019. The findings presented in this article show a positive representation of the U.S. In comparison, the findings point to Indonesia's ambiguity in dealing with China. This includes concerns over the impact of China's trade policies on Indonesia's economy, the potential use of joint port infrastructure projects for military purposes, and China's behaviour in the South China Sea.

**Keywords:** Indonesia, middle power, China-Indonesia relations, US-Indonesia relations, content analysis, Maritime Fulcrum, Australia, South China Sea, Natuna, BRI, AIIB, Infrastructure, balancer

## Introduction

Indonesia is an important state for both China and the United States (U.S.) due to its strategic maritime position and recognised status as the first among equals in ASEAN. Almost half of the world's trading goods and oil supply pass through key Indonesian straits, including the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, the Strait of Sunda, and the Strait of Lombok.<sup>1</sup> Access to the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, the Strait of Sunda, and the Strait of Lombok is also crucial to enable China and the U.S. to move their naval assets between the Pacific and Indian Oceans.<sup>2</sup> Indonesia also matters for China and the U.S. as it enjoys the status as the largest country in the region and as a recognised leader within ASEAN. Indonesia has proposed the concept of the ASEAN Security Community, actively sought to conduct conflict mediation efforts in the South China Sea disputes, initiated the development of the ASEAN Maritime Forum, and the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook.<sup>3</sup>

Given the history of troubled relations between Indonesia and both China and the U.S., one might expect both countries to react negatively to the Indonesian media and government. According to Drake, most Indonesians believe that the government of China provided financial and political support to an attempted coup on 30th September 1965 conducted by junior leftist Indonesian army officers and the Indonesian Communist Party.<sup>4</sup> Despite little to no evidence of China's involvement in the attempted coup, this incident led to Indonesia's complete break in diplomatic relations with China from 1967 until 1990.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Indonesia-U.S. relations have historically had difficult phases that shaped the political and societal perception of the U.S. as a country that is always "meddling in almost all aspects of life" in Indonesia.<sup>6</sup> The two countries' foreign relations reached its lowest point during the late 1950s as the Eisenhower administration supported major rebellions in Sulawesi and Sumatra that nearly tore the country apart.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, there are also reasons why China and the U.S. may be cast in a positive light. Since the restoration of diplomatic ties in 1990, Sino-Indonesian relations have improved significantly. For example, in November 2007 the two countries signed an Agreement on Cooperation Activities in the Field of Defence. Indonesia-U.S. relations has also dramatically transformed in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks from a series of problematic interactions into a strategic partnership. In 2001 the two countries established the Indonesia-U.S. Security Dialogue and they have also re-opened the International Military Education and Training programme in 2003.

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<sup>1</sup> Carana, *Impact of Transport and Logistics on Indonesia's Trade Competitiveness* (2004), [http://www.carana.com/images/PDF\\_car/Indonesia%20Transport%20and%20Logistics%20Report.pdf](http://www.carana.com/images/PDF_car/Indonesia%20Transport%20and%20Logistics%20Report.pdf) (accessed January 20, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Greta Nabbs-Keller, "Growing Convergence, Greater Consequence: The Strategic Implications of Closer Indonesia-China Relations," *Security Challenges* 7, no.3 (2011): 34.

<sup>3</sup> Shoji Tomotaka, *ASEAN Security Community: An Initiative for Peace and Stability* (2008), [http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/kiyo/pdf/2008/bulletin\\_e2008\\_3.pdf](http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/kiyo/pdf/2008/bulletin_e2008_3.pdf) (accessed August 1, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Earl Drake, "Indonesia and China: Old Habits and New internationalism," *The Pacific Review* 4, no.3 (1991): 216.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Williams, "China and Indonesia Make Up: Reflections on a Troubled Relationship," *Indonesia*: 149.

<sup>6</sup> Timo Kivimaki, "U.S.—Indonesian Relations During the Economic Crisis: Where Has Indonesia's Bargaining Power Gone?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 22, no. 3 (2000): 527-549.

<sup>7</sup> Audrey R. Kahin and George McT Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy: the Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

This article seeks to understand how the China and the U.S. leadership is presented in media and government discourse in Indonesia, the largest country in Southeast Asia that has the potential to be a regional leader through the combination of semi-structured interviews and content analysis.

## Findings

Indonesian officials mentioned the words “challenge” or “threat” together with “opportunity” when asked about their view of China. They explained that relations with China provide opportunities for Indonesia especially in the area of infrastructure development. Interviewed officials linked the Jokowi administration’s Global Maritime Fulcrum Initiative with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly known as the One Belt One Road (OBOR), and look for synergy between the two.

One of the key pillars of the Indonesian Global Maritime Fulcrum initiative is a pledge to improve Indonesia’s maritime infrastructure by developing ports and shipping industry. Funds from China’s Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is expected by the Indonesian government to fund the development of 24 seaports, 15 airports, 1,000 kilometres of road, 8,700 kilometres of railway networks, and power plants with a 35,000-megawatt capacity.<sup>8</sup>

Although Indonesian officials think there are significant benefits offered by China’s BRI initiative, they also voiced their concerns regarding a number of issues. These include: first, the possibility that deep-ports built by China in Indonesia can be used as facilities to repair and refuel Chinese naval ships in Southeast Asia. To quote a senior official at the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

We can use the opportunities offered by [the BRI] but we also need to be prudent ... In the case of Sri Lanka..., as China control the port management, their warships [can] enter [the port facility].<sup>9</sup>

Second, during interviews, officials used the term “challenge” or “threat” when describing Sino-Indonesian interactions in the South China Sea (SCS). Indonesian government officials frequently asserted that due to the proximity of Natuna to the disputed area, and the absence of China’s clarification on whether or not its claims encompass Indonesia’s exclusive economic zone, the growing tension in the SCS poses a threat to Indonesia.<sup>10</sup>

Third, interviewed Indonesian officials also raised concerns over the growing number of foreign workers from China in Indonesia.<sup>11</sup> As an Indonesian official puts it: “Our concern is there are many workers who come from China. When they have settled it will be difficult to [make them] leave.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *The Jakarta Post*, “RI Should Seek Better Realization in AIIB Projects,” May 2, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a senior official from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jakarta, August 21, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Senia Febrica and Suzie Sudarman, “Analysing Indonesian Media and Government Representation of China,” *British Journal of Chinese Studies* 8, no.2 (2018): 104-105.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with two senior officials from the Indonesian Maritime Security Board, Jakarta, August 26, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Indonesian officials presented a more positive view regarding U.S. leadership in the region. Despite using the words “challenge” and “opportunity” to explain growing influence of the U.S. in the region, officials highlighted shared interest and concerns regarding China’s military activities in the SCS.<sup>13</sup> As a high government official from the Indonesian Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs claimed: “I do not think the U.S. posed a great threat...Rather, from my point of view relations with the U.S. could bring lots of benefits...especially as a source political support at global level.”<sup>14</sup> This view was also echoed by a senior official from the Indonesian Minister of Defence. As he put it: “We do not view the U.S. as a potential challenge or threat. Why? If the U.S. presence here is to be a balancer [against China] then why not.”<sup>15</sup>

Results of media analysis also confirm Indonesia’s ambiguous perception towards China and a more positive representation of the U.S. As part of the media analysis, we examined articles published by the two newspapers with the highest readership in Indonesia –*The Jakarta Post* and *Kompas*– from January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 to October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019 that discussed “China and Indonesia” and “U.S. and Indonesia” relations.

**Table 1. Media Representation of China**

| Newspaper               | Opportunity (Peluang) |          |         | Benefit (Keuntungan/untung) |          |         | Threat (Ancaman) |          |         |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------|---------|-----------------------------|----------|---------|------------------|----------|---------|
|                         | Positive              | Negative | Neutral | Positive                    | Negative | Neutral | Positive         | Negative | Neutral |
| <i>The Jakarta Post</i> | 31                    | 4        | 0       | 22                          | 7        | 0       | 1                | 6        | 0       |
| <i>Kompas</i>           | 19                    | 0        | 0       | 0                           | 1        | 0       | 0                | 0        | 2       |

Articles published by *The Jakarta Post* used the word opportunity/opportunities 35 times and the word benefit/beneficial 22 times. *Kompas* articles mentioned the word opportunity (*peluang*) 19 times and the word benefit (*keuntungan*) once. These words were mainly but not exclusively used to describe China-Indonesia and China-Southeast Asia positively.

Relations with China are portrayed by both newspapers as providing positive opportunities for Indonesia in terms of transfer of technology, source of investment in digital sector, and infrastructure development. The opportunity for infrastructure development that could be facilitated through China’s BRI initiative has been highlighted as the main economic opportunity that Indonesia can gain from its relations with China.

The use of the words opportunity and opportunities that represented China negatively appeared four times in *The Jakarta Post*. The word opportunities was used to point out the competitive nature of China’s economy vis-à-vis individual ASEAN economies, the possibility of conflict in the SCS in

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Interview with an official from the Indonesian Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs, Jakarta, August 7, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a senior official from the Indonesian Ministry of Defence, Jakarta, August 24, 2015.

hindering any prospect for the exploitation of resources in this water, and rumours regarding the lack of employment opportunities for locals in China's infrastructure projects in Indonesia. The word benefit (*keuntungan*) was only mentioned once in *Kompas* to portray China negatively. A *Kompas* article explained that China got the upper-hand against its neighbouring countries in the SCS maritime disputes due to its political influence and size.

Negative connotations in the use of the word benefit and beneficial in *The Jakarta Post* highlighted three points: first, concern over benefits of cooperation. Published articles noted politician and academic concerns that Indonesia will only serve as a market for Chinese products and reported delays in Chinese-Indonesian joint projects. Second, the practice of Chinese coast guard vessels hindering the Indonesian authorities from arresting a Chinese fishing vessel, the Kway Fey 10078, which was suspected of fishing illegally in Indonesia's Natuna Sea in March 2016, have raised concern over China's misconduct in the SCS. Third, the problem of illegal migrants from China in Indonesia has made media headlines following a number of minor incidents and statements made by government officials. For example, in December 2016 the arrest of four Chinese citizens suspected of growing chilli contaminated with bacteria in Bogor regency created a nation-wide speculation that it was a deliberate act to subvert Indonesian plantations.<sup>16</sup>

In *The Jakarta Post* articles that discussed Sino-Indonesian relations, the word threat was primarily used to explain negative aspects of Sino-Indonesia relations. Here the word threat was used primarily to explain China's involvement in the SCS conflict and hostile acts by the Chinese coast guard against the Indonesian authorities in Natuna Sea. China was also presented as a threat due to the rise of its economy, negative impact of the influx of cheap products from China on domestic industry, and the growing number of Chinese foreign workers in Indonesia. The word threat was mentioned only once to portray China in a positive light. In this article, *The Jakarta Post* quoted President Jokowi's remarks regarding the use of Yuan in trading activities between Indonesia and China as a good attempt to reduce dependence on U.S. dollar.<sup>17</sup> In *Kompas* the word threat was mentioned twice. It did not portray China negatively or positively. Threat here was articulated to explain the legal punishment for any perpetrator who spread a rumour regarding the presence of Chinese police officials in guarding a protest in Jakarta in May 2019. Second, the word threat was articulated to explain various strategies that China can use to counter the U.S. new tariff as trade war between the two countries escalate. Despite not mentioning China directly as a threat in *Kompas* articles, the words "South China Sea" appeared seventeen times and gave China a negative portrayal. *Kompas* reported China's refusal of tribunal ruling, illegal fishing activities in the SCS, and Chinese coast guard vessel infringement of jurisdiction in Indonesia's Natuna Sea.

<sup>16</sup> *The Jakarta Post*, "Chili conspiracy irks China," December 19, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> *The Jakarta Post*, "Jokowi urges bigger role for emerging markets in G20," November 17, 2015.

**Table 2. Media Representation of the U.S.**

| Newspaper               | Opportunity/Opportunities<br>( <i>Peluang</i> ) |          |         | Benefit/Beneficial<br>( <i>Keuntungan/untung</i> ) |          |         | Threat<br>( <i>Ancaman</i> ) |          |         |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------|---------|----------------------------------------------------|----------|---------|------------------------------|----------|---------|
|                         | Positive                                        | Negative | Neutral | Positive                                           | Negative | Neutral | Positive                     | Negative | Neutral |
| <i>The Jakarta Post</i> | 20                                              | 0        | 0       | 6                                                  | 0        | 0       | 7                            | 0        | 0       |
| <i>Kompas</i>           | 3                                               | 1        | 0       | 2                                                  | 0        | 4       | 1                            | 7        | 1       |

*The Jakarta Post* and *Kompas* articles used the words opportunity and opportunities mainly to portray Indonesia and the U.S. relations in a positive light. The U.S. was portrayed as a strategic partner in advancing the Indo-Pacific cooperation concept, facilitating closer Indonesia-Australia defence cooperation, fostering peaceful cooperation in Southeast Asia, dealing with shared diplomatic and security concern on issues like terrorism and radicalism, and improving cooperation in the economic and functional sector, such as education. The strengthening of the U.S. military presence in Australia was also represented in the media as an opportunity for Indonesia to “embrace the U.S. as the main provider of military training and assistance” rather than a threat.<sup>18</sup> The word opportunity was also used in a *Kompas* article once to portray the U.S. negatively. This article explained the U.S. involvement in anti-communist purge in 1960s in Indonesia.

The words benefit and beneficial appeared six times in *The Jakarta Post* and *Kompas* articles and mainly highlighted the positive aspects of Indonesia-U.S. relations. These articles raised four points: first, the U.S. is a strategic economic and security partner for ASEAN. Second, trade partnership between Indonesia and the U.S. is mutually beneficial. Third, Indonesia should use the U.S. defence arrangements with countries in the Pacific to maximise its national interests. Fourth, the Indonesia-U.S. mutual commitment to deepening cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region is deemed beneficial for “regional security...and a rules-based international order.”<sup>19</sup> In *Kompas*, the word benefit (*untung*) was also used four out of six times to refer to a person’s name. Therefore, it did not provide positive or negative representation of the U.S.

The word threat was found seven times in *The Jakarta Post* articles and all noted that the U.S. is not a threat to Indonesia. These articles portrayed the U.S. as a useful partner to address common threats such as terrorism and climate change. *Kompas* articles, however, used the word threat seven times to explain the negative aspects of the U.S.-Indonesia relations. These include the U.S. disapproval of Indonesia’s purchase of eleven Sukhoi planes from Russia, the negative impact of the U.S.-China trade war on the Rupiah exchange rate, and the U.S. threatening to revoke special tariff placement for Indonesian exports.

<sup>18</sup> Wibawanto, Nugroho, “US-Australia defense ties not a threat to Indonesia,” in *The Jakarta Post*, March 11, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> *The Jakarta Post*, “US applauds Indonesia’s measures for peace, stability,” March 28, 2018.

## **Conclusion**

Indonesia shows ambiguity in dealing with both the U.S. and China. Indonesian officials and media mentioned the benefit of economic cooperation with China and the U.S., but they also raised concerns over China's misconduct in the SCS and the growing number of Chinese foreign workers in Indonesia. The national media was also concerned with the U.S. disapproval over Indonesia's decision to purchase planes from Russia and Washington's warning to revoke special tariffs for Indonesian exports because of a trade deficit. However, in comparison to the negative representation of China by Indonesian officials and media, the U.S. leadership in the region had been depicted more positively. The U.S. role as a balancer against China in the region was portrayed positively in officials' statements and media reports.