

Rethinking Indonesia's Interests in the BRI Projects under Jokowi's Presidency: The Pros and Cons

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Abstract: Under Jokowi's presidency, the BRI project was able to further strengthen the bilateral ties between Indonesia and China. This study aims to analyse and focus on: first, the pros and cons of Indonesia's interests in the BRI projects under Jokowi's presidency; second, the political leadership of Jokowi in managing and implementing BRI projects in Indonesia. This study used a qualitative approach to gather comprehensive data through a literature review. As an analytical tool for this research, the author used the political leadership theory by Kalevi Jaakko Holsti. The finding showed that, first, those who are pro-BRI will provide full support, supervision, and evaluation from year to year. Meanwhile, there are several cons to the BRI project due to fear of the debt trap, the influx of Chinese workers, the environmental damage, the overlapping maritime claims, anti-communist sentiment, and the image of Chinese products. The negative sentiment towards the BRI project can be eased with a soft-infrastructure approach that touches community (people-to-people) bonds. Second, regarding Jokowi's eight-year leadership, Jokowi's type of political leadership is more directed as a conciliator, especially in the China BRI project. It is based on Jokowi's record of making China a good partner and big brother.

Keywords: Indonesia's interest; China's BRI; Bilateral Relation; Jokowi.

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Introduction

There is still considerable debate over China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project in Indonesia. Briefly, President Xi Jinping has aimed to increase connectivity between countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe through China's Belt and Road Initiative, especially in infrastructure, investment, and trade development. In addition, China wants to build geo-economic and geopolitical influence in the Asia Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions with the BRI as their grand strategy. BRI is a multiregional political economy cooperation initiative initiated by China to implement a series of mega connectivity projects across six economic corridors (China-Mongolia-Russia, China-Central Asia-West Asia, New Eurasia Land Bridge, China-Indochina Peninsula, China-Bangladesh-India-Myanmar, and China-Pakistan) focusing specifically on trade, investment, and infrastructure development (Czarewacz-Filipowicz, 2022; OECD, 2018). BRI is the new term used to replace OBOR - One Belt, One Road (One Belt, One Road, 一带一路, yīdài yīlù). It is changing the word "one" to prevent misunderstandings regarding the One China Policy.

BRI became a new face for Chinese foreign policy to rebuild the glory of the Silk Road. A key objective of the Belt and Road Initiative is to turn China into the centre of world economic and trade activity, most notably in countries connected by the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Yoshimatsu, 2022). By combining these

two approaches, China has experienced rapid economic growth and has become one of the world's leading economies that can dominate global trade after the United States. It is, therefore, essential to monitor and pay close attention to China's rapid rise and development since it presents a significant threat.

As the largest country in Southeast Asia and one of the countries linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans, Indonesia is also a partner in the BRI project. Before the 2014 Presidential Elections, Joko Widodo (Jokowi) served as the Governor of Jakarta. As part of his visit to Jakarta on October 3, 2013, President Xi directly addressed the Parliament of Indonesia to present the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. In his remarks, he described Indonesia's important role in the relationship between the two countries. This indicates that China views Indonesia as one of the most crucial ASEAN members with whom it must deal to implement its project and as a starting point for China's global maritime connectivity to counterbalance its hegemony (Jemadu & Lantang, 2021).

As the seventh President of Indonesia after winning the 2014 Presidential Election, Jokowi has warmly welcomed bilateral relations with China for the next five years (2014–2019). Additionally, bilateral cooperation is becoming more intense following Jokowi's re-election as Indonesia's President for 2019–2024. Jokowi sees an excellent opportunity to marry Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) vision with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially in infrastructure development.

It can bridge land and sea connectivity for all people in the archipelago and support equitable economic growth.

Following the above brief explanation, this study aims to analyse and focus on the following: Indonesia's interests in the BRI projects under Jokowi's presidency; and Jokowi's leadership in managing and implementing BRI projects in Indonesia. The analysis is based on the geoeconomic and geopolitical dynamics of bilateral relations under President Jokowi and President Xi, particularly concerning the BRI project. Furthermore, since President Xi's speech launching OBOR, later renamed BRI, at the Indonesian Parliament, this project has generated much debate and discussion among experts, scholars, policymakers, and societies. So, as an analytical tool, the author uses international relations studies, namely the political leadership theory by Kalevi Jaakko Holsti.

Theoretical Framework

Before discussing the BRI project during Jokowi's presidency, the author examines relevant previous studies for their novelty and highlights their importance. Following that, the author uses several previous studies that relate to the topic of this discussion to develop a comprehensive picture of the analysis and research gap. First, Zulham (2021), in his research entitled "The importance of the belt and road initiative for Indonesia in realising the global maritime fulcrum", emphasised the importance of the BRI for Indonesia, which is rapidly transforming into a world maritime axis and being

considered a stepping stone for Indonesia because Indonesia's GMF and China's BRI serve the same purpose in terms of maritime connectivity. Maritime connectivity is essential to realising and advancing the ideal of achieving prosperity. Thus, it is hoped that both Indonesia and China will benefit from the cooperation that has been established.

Second, Weng et al. (2021), with the title "Challenges faced by Chinese firms implementing the 'Belt and Road Initiative': Evidence from three railway projects". They examined a few ecological and social effects of BRI projects in beneficiary countries by combining experimental evidence on rail line projects in three major countries, including Indonesia, Ethiopia, and Kenya. By utilizing comparative analysis, the author indicates that, despite political leaders' acceptance of BRI projects as a means of supporting national transportation development, the ambitious infrastructure project's implementation encountered significant management and operational challenges that Chinese partners had not anticipated, particularly for local communities in the affected regions.

Third, Yuliantoro (2020), with the title "The 2019 presidential election and the BRI's prospects in Indonesia," argues that with Jokowi being re-elected in 2019, he is in a stronger position than he was five years ago. Therefore, the most crucial time for Beijing and Jakarta to vigorously advance BRI cooperation will be from 2020 to 2022. During Jokowi's second term, BRI projects must also be better aligned with his development priorities

and policies. In addition, Jokowi stated that his administration welcomed China's BRI, particularly the infrastructure development project aimed at improving Indonesia's infrastructure quality and quantity, provided that it was compatible with Jokowi's vision for implementing Indonesia's GMF.

Forth, Lalisang and Candra (2020), with the title "Indonesia's global maritime fulcrum and China's belt and road initiative: A match made at sea," mentioned that the implementation of GMF and BRI is very top-down, leading to good relations between governments. Because of this, it is unlikely that the GMF and BRI will be used to advance Indonesia's strategic interests through other investments and diplomacy. Jokowi's efforts to maintain and strengthen its domestic power have been aided and hindered by Indonesia's cooperation with the BRI. In addition, its findings regarding people-to-people relations and economic cooperation were relatively weak.

Fifth, Yuniarto (2020), with the title "Opportunities and challenges of socio-cultural cooperation in China's Belt and Road Initiative in Indonesia," said that China's BRI does not only focus on trade and infrastructure financing but also focuses on human development resources through people-to-people exchanges through socio-cultural exchanges between Indonesia and China, such as in labour migration, educational exchanges, tourism relations, and others. Therefore, both Indonesia and China's cooperation has the potential to grow in all spheres in the future and to become even stronger.

However, since cooperation takes time, there is still time to determine the actual benefits of China and Indonesia's participation in the BRI Project, particularly in terms of enhancing people's well-being.

Based on several previous studies above, this research is needed to discuss BRI during Jokowi's leadership with political leadership theory by Kalevi Jaakko Holsti that has yet to be primarily studied. Referring to Holsti, the political leadership theory highlights that the individual personality of a state leader will be the basis for how a leader perceives his external environment as a friend or enemy. Moreover, the president's political position places an individual as the holder of the highest executive power in a country. Therefore, his personality in leading will undoubtedly influence how to build relationships, make policies and decisions, and use or utilise the power he has.

Holsti explained that a leader has four types of political personality, namely: (1) world leaders. A world leader is a leader who has a more dominant and extroverted personality. The characteristics of this leader are having good initiative with comprehensive coverage, being flexible, and having a tendency to use military force; (2) a block leader. A block leader is a leader who has a strong, dominant personality and is an introvert. This leader's characteristics are intense dominance and high tenacity; (3) conciliator. The conciliator is a leader who has low dominance and an extrovert personality. This leader needs more consistency but has strong power and can

accommodate their interests well; (4) maintainer. The maintainer is a leader who has low dominance and an introverted personality. The characteristics of this leader are maintaining the status quo that is owned, liking peace, and being rarely involved in a conflict. However, this research aims to explore more from different perspectives and theories and fill in the gaps in previous research, namely in terms of pros and cons as well as the political leadership of Jokowi. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the novelty of the research and be relevant to recent BRI projects in Indonesia.

Method

In this study, the author uses a descriptive-qualitative method with a literature review as the method for collecting data. A literature review is needed to describe what was done, what was found, and how it was reported in the previous research (Moher et al., 2019). So, to get a comprehensive study of the BRI's project in Indonesia, the author uses a literature review by optimising secondary data sources such as (online) newspapers, books, book chapters, journals, official government websites, and YouTube channels that the public can access.

Furthermore, the author also searches for online material by specifying several keywords in English and Indonesian, such as Indonesia-China, President Joko Widodo, Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF), and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Finally, the interactive data analysis method was used to analyze all the collected data. This

method has four phases: data collection, data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions (Miles et al., 2019).

Result and Discussion

Jokowi's Interest in the BRI Projects

During his first term as president, Jokowi proposed the GMF vision for transforming Indonesia into a global maritime axis. In addition to improving maritime sector infrastructure, Indonesia's position as an archipelagic nation is included in the definition of the global maritime axis. According to Prakoso (2022), Negara, and Suryadinata (2019), these include (1) revitalising maritime culture, (2) maintaining and managing maritime resources, (3) developing maritime infrastructure and connectivity, (4) intensifying maritime diplomacy, and (5) strengthening maritime defence forces, as reflected in the GMF in the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2015–2019.

Thus, Jokowi prioritised improving connectivity by building and upgrading infrastructure. Jokowi stated at the 9th East Asia Summit in November 2014 that the government is committed to improving Indonesia's maritime infrastructure and establishing Indonesia as a global maritime axis (Yoshimatsu, 2022). Moreover, Jokowi emphasises that Indonesia's future foreign policy will prioritise strengthening Indonesia's maritime connectivity, fisheries, maritime diplomacy, and maritime defence power (Duquennoy & Zielonka, 2015).

President Jokowi made it abundantly clear at the First Belt and Road

Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in May 2017 that his administration was open to any cooperation and connectivity project (Yuliantoro, 2020). In this meeting, Jokowi also established a GMF Task Force led by the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment to promote infrastructure development in four corridors, namely Bali, North Sulawesi, North Sumatera, and North Kalimantan (Rakhmat & Permadi, 2020). As long as it is in line with Indonesia's national interests, Jokowi will support the BRI project. However, he emphasizes that Indonesia's domestic funding needs to be increased to implement his ambitious infrastructure-building policy. Therefore, Jokowi's economic strategy has emphasised securing Chinese investment for infrastructure projects. Based on the study of China's National Information Centre (2016), there are five goals that China wants to achieve in the BRI, namely: (1) policy coordination: planning and supporting large-scale infrastructural development projects; (2) facility connectivity: building facilities to enable connectivity along the Belt and Road; (3) unimpeded trade and investment: facilitating cross-border investments and supply chain cooperation; (4) financial integration: enhancing monetary policy coordination and bilateral financial cooperation; and (5) community exchanges: promoting people-to-people bonds and cooperation.

In light of the plan to elevate and develop the nation's between-island network, Indonesia's GMF and China's BRI

completed each other. In terms of geopolitics and economics, China and Indonesia are mutually dependent. President Xi is attempting to integrate President Jokowi's concepts of the global maritime axis into China's Maritime Silk Road construction in Indonesia (Ifatari & Risman, 2020). According to Klemensits (2018), China considers Indonesia the most crucial state in Southeast Asia for geo-economic and geostrategic reasons. Additionally, President Xi considers Indonesia an important market for his products, a location in which Chinese investments are highly sought after, and a potential driver of regional integration in the BRI project (Darmawan, Dwianto, & Akmala, 2002). Nevertheless, Jokowi and Xi Jinping are working together to promote GMF and BRI synergies. Furthermore, at the Second Belt and Road Initiative in Beijing on April 29, 2019, several Chinese and Indonesian business people signed 23 Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) regarding the OBOR/BRI project.

The BRI in Indonesia between Pros and Cons

In Indonesia, domestic pros and cons related to the BRI project have received much attention and continue to be studied by academics and policymakers. Those who are pro-implementing the BRI project realise that the BRI project will provide equal benefits between the two countries. Therefore, they provide full support in the realisation of the BRI project and continue to provide supervision and evaluation processes that take place from year to year. In addition,

Indonesia demonstrated tremendous enthusiasm for the BRI project among the ASEAN members (Duquennoy & Zielonka, 2015).

On the other hand, there are several cons to implementing BRI projects, as follows: First, there is the fear of the debt trap. Indonesian experts, scholars, and society are afraid of the existence of a debt trap created by China. A growing number of critics have branded specific BRI projects as "debt-trap diplomacy" since most BRI funds are loans rather than grants. According to Hurley et al. (2018), eight of the 86 countries participating in the BRI are particularly susceptible to debt distress, such as Pakistan, the Maldives, Djibouti, Laos, Montenegro, Mongolia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka is one of the current examples of China's debt traps.

Reflecting on this experience, infrastructure projects that fail to pay off eventually fall into the hands of China. The incident that happened to some of these countries is certainly a valuable lesson and a critical note for the Indonesian government because the threat of taking over infrastructure due to default on debt payments is imminent. Moreover, Jokowi decided to cooperate with China's BRI after passing the first half of his leadership period, especially in the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail (HSR) project (Ngin, 2022). In addition, the government carries out the cooperation contract with the business-to-business (B2B) scheme to avoid the Chinese investment debt trap. However, unfortunately, the involvement of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the

BRI project can become a loophole detrimental to the state. If this is not anticipated, then automatically, part of the debt will fall under the responsibility of the state.

Second, the influx of Chinese workers. The Indonesian government needs help to create more than two million jobs annually to accommodate new domestic workers to enter the job market. Meanwhile, the establishment of BRI cooperation requires the use of workers from China. So, the added value of this project only benefits China because the existence of the BRI project is a way to expand the job market more broadly for Chinese workers (Yuliantoro, 2010) and the uncontrolled influx of Chinese workers into Indonesia (Rakhmat & Permadi, 2020). As a result, this situation created anti-Chinese workers' sentiment in Indonesia (Lalisang & Candra, 2020). As a result, in the last three years, Jokowi has faced massive protests from the public for closing the gate to China's need for BRI projects.

The third is environmental damage. According to the Indonesian government, its involvement in the BRI project was limited to joint feasibility studies and environmental impact assessments (AMDAL) conducted by Chinese and Indonesian businesses and the government. However, based on the research by Sahrasad (2019), Sanjaya and Sari (2020) mentioned that the Indonesia Forum for the Environment (WALHI) found the process of preparing AMDAL and feasibility studies was carried out unprofessionally because: (1) the area for

BRI projects is not matched with the Regional Spatial Plan (RTRW) for the regions (regency/cities); (2) environmental permits are issued when the project is an ongoing process; (3) the government buys local people land with the lower standard price; and (4) local people who live around the BRI projects also protested because the project work was carried out 7 x 24 hours, caused air pollution, and made part of the resident's land for project waste disposal.

The fourth is overlapping maritime claims. Disputes over maritime rights in the Natuna Sea have also added to bilateral tension. China's nine-dash line and the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the North Natuna Sea remain potential sources of conflict with Beijing. China uses the nine-dash line for claims where China's claims are not recognized by international law, while Indonesia's claim is based on UNCLOS. In addition, China claims that the waters around the Natuna Islands have been Chinese "traditional fishing grounds" for a long time, despite Indonesia's recognition of its sovereign rights to them. As a result, Chinese fishing vessels fishing in Indonesia's EEZ in the Natuna waters have been involved in multiple maritime incidents over the past five years (Sinaga, 2020).

In 2017, the Indonesian government chose to rename the South China Sea as the North Natuna Sea as a type of caution from the Indonesian government to China's claim. With the renaming of the North Natuna Sea, the Indonesian government wants to make Indonesia stronger in the political

economy and defence sector as a middle-power country (Sriyanto, 2018). In the defence sector, the nine-dash line claims held by China in the North Natuna Sea region pose a threat to regional security. Moreover, from the Indonesian government's perspective, every year, Indonesia loses US\$20 billion from several illegal marine activities from China, such as illegal fishing and smuggling, as well as a violation by the China Coast Guard in the Natuna waters and Indonesia's EEZ.

The fifth is anti-communist sentiment. The BRI comes from the Chinese initiative, which is the initiative of a communist country. The rise of anti-communist sentiment, as seen in the recent heated public debate on the failed Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), strongly indicates the public's resistance to the resurgence of communism in Indonesia. If this phenomenon is not managed carefully, it is feared it will strengthen the Indonesian public's negative sentiment, both for the Indonesian and Chinese governments (Adriansyah & Wu, 2020). Based on a survey by the Wahid Foundation (2017), as reported by Rozaq (2018) and Rini (2018), the communist group is the most disliked group, with a percentage of 21.9%; LGBT groups occupy the second highest position at 17.8%; the Jewish group (7.1%); Christian (3%), Atheist (2.5%), Shia (1.2%), Chinese (0.7%), Wahhabism (0.6%), Catholic (0.5%), and Buddhist (0.5%). This survey showed increased rhetoric about anti-communism, and this issue was being used to attack President Jokowi.

The sixth is the image of Chinese products in Indonesia. The Indonesian people still have bad judgements about the image of Chinese products. The Indonesian government must consider if they want to use Chinese products because of their quality and duration. The government needs to learn from what it did when the DKI Jakarta Government imported buses from China with the Zhong Tong brand for Transjakarta public vehicles. Unfortunately, imported buses often catch fire during operational activities. As a result, PT. Transjakarta has temporarily suspended the operation of buses with the Zhong Tong brand.

Pratiwi (2020) states that negative sentiment towards the BRI project can be dampened if cooperation with China not only prioritises 'hard' infrastructure investment but can also be combined with an increase in 'soft' infrastructure, which touches the community (people-to-people). For this reason, with Jokowi's re-election in his second administration, he has a better position and broadens the scope of bilateral cooperation with China. As a result, 66 bilateral agreements have been signed between Jokowi and Xi that cover a variety of cooperation areas, such as infrastructure, education, health, science and technology, culture, law enforcement, tourism, the environment, and fighting terrorism (Yuliantoro, 2020; Lalisang & Candra, 2020).

The Political Leadership of Jokowi

Every leader certainly has their own characteristics, including Jokowi. Jokowi is a national leader known to be

close to his people because of his penchant for direct interaction with them. He started when he became mayor of Solo and governor of DKI Jakarta. For this reason, in the first period of his leadership as the President of Indonesia, Jokowi, who already had experience in leading regions, was considered capable of carrying out his leadership function as a president. This is shown by the efforts made to realise Nawacita (the nine-priority agenda) and Indonesia's GMF vision. In addition, Jokowi believes that equitable distribution of infrastructure development in every region, especially outside Java Island, must be carried out and prioritized so that there is economic equality, reducing poverty, creating jobs, and accelerating access to connectivity for both people and goods. So, China's BRI is expected to open up opportunities for Indonesia to be more assertive in guarding and realizing Indonesia's national interests as the world's maritime axis.

Based on the author's analysis using the political leadership theory by Holsti, Jokowi's type of political leadership is more directed as a conciliator, especially in the China BRI project. This is based on Jokowi's track record in positioning China as a partner; since serving as President in 2014 until now, Jokowi has welcomed all forms of Chinese cooperation in the various bilateral forums held so far. Jokowi realises that accelerating infrastructure development requires considerable financial investment (Lim & Liu, 2021). More than that, as a middle-power country, Jokowi needs technology transfer, knowledge development, and capital loans

from developed countries. With Indonesia's foreign policy based on the free and active principle of prioritising national interests, Jokowi believes that the BRI will provide positive value for Indonesia's progress. Even though the process is challenging to carry out because of the many pros and cons that continue to accompany this project's journey, for this reason, Jokowi's policy directives in the process of implementation and supervision are urgently needed to provide guarantees and hope that the BRI project will not harm the state and burden society in the future.

With Jokowi being re-elected in the 2019 Presidential Election, Indonesia's relations have become increasingly closer to China and are experiencing rapid progress. In fact, according to various works of literature, it is stated that throughout the history of Indonesian leadership, from time to time, the bilateral relations that existed during Jokowi's leadership were considered the closest compared to previous Indonesian presidents. The closeness of this bilateral relationship also significantly influences the increasing amount of Chinese investment in Indonesia. China is one of Indonesia's biggest cooperation partners besides Singapore and Japan. Even at the bilateral meeting in Bali after completing the 2022 G20 Leaders' Summit, Jokowi did not hesitate to greet Xi Jinping as 'Big Brother' in his speech. During the meeting, Jokowi also emphasized the importance of efforts to develop bilateral relations between Indonesia and China so that they can realize the connection of land and sea

routes in the BRI projects and help ensure the nation's long-term prosperity (Tyson & Apresian, 2021).

Additionally, 2024 will be the last year of Jokowi's leadership. So, the sustainability of the BRI project will also depend heavily on the next president. If the newly elected president has the same vision as Jokowi, then Indonesia's BRI project still has a bright future. Moreover, most Indonesian people still believe in Jokowi, so anyone Jokowi supports has a great chance of winning the 2024 presidential election. Conversely, if the person elected is the antithesis of Jokowi, which usually erases the previous leader's legacy, then the BRI project's future will be dismal and will also affect the bilateral relations between the two countries. This analysis was carried out because the role of the leader is one of the essential and dominant factors in its existence in the implementation of cooperation with other parties.

Conclusion

The agenda of Jokowi's first administration placed a significant emphasis on the improvement of hard infrastructure and continued with the development of soft infrastructure as an additional priority of the BRI project in Jokowi's second administration agenda. Despite Jokowi's support for the BRI, there are still criticisms. Based on the analysis above, first, it can be concluded that those pros with the BRI project will provide full year-to-year support, supervision, and evaluation. In the meantime, the BRI project faces several cons due to concerns

about the debt trap, the influx of Chinese workers, environmental damage, overlapping maritime claims, anti-communist sentiment, and the image of Chinese products. A soft-infrastructure strategy that focuses on community (people-to-people) bonds can lessen the negative perception of the BRI project.

Second, regarding Jokowi's eight-year leadership, Jokowi's type of political leadership is more directed as a conciliator, especially in the China BRI project. This is based on Jokowi's track record as the president who made China a good partner and big brother. Jokowi's figure and leadership are two of the main factors that allowed bilateral relations between Indonesia and China to become closer as long as they aligned with Indonesia's national interests.

There are three research limitations in this study, as follows: First, with the limited study time when this article was written, the author chose to optimise the use of secondary data to support essential data and information. Second, this study only focuses on Jokowi's administration, especially the first administration (2014–2019) and the ongoing process of the second administration (2019–present). Third, the author focuses on the BRI Project in Indonesia and does not compare it with the BRI Project in other ASEAN members because it considers the many actors and interests of ASEAN countries in the BRI Project.

Last but not least, for further studies, the author should consider exploring more about: first, the

implementation of the BRI project under Jokowi, especially in the second administration (2019–2024). Second, after Jokowi completes his term in 2024, how will the future of the BRI project in Indonesia be with the next president?

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