

Asian Diplomacy: The “Fulcrum” Role of Two Major Powers in East Asia?

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The paper explores the extent to which the relationship between China and Indonesia can contribute to region-building. It points to the ways in which the interests of each country will inevitably overlap in the coming years. China’s desire for greater global influence motivates its economic outreaches to Indonesia. This courtship of Indonesia is taking place in an international environment that Beijing conceptualizes as “multipolar.” It accords with Indonesia’s ambition to strategically position itself at the center of maritime Southeast Asia and the ASEAN Economic Community and become a “global maritime fulcrum” based on enhanced logistics and transportation infrastructures. Since Indonesia and China are both firmly embedded in the ASEAN-led regional order, which is open, loose and welcoming of non-East Asian states’ participation, they have no intention of challenging US Pacific power.

Keywords: China, Indonesia, ASEAN, maritime, fulcrum

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I. Introduction and Historical Background

This paper explores the extent to which the relationship between China and Indonesia can contribute to region-building. It points to the ways in which each country’s interests cannot but overlap in the coming years. However, possible obstacles to this outcome include Indonesian reluctance to participate in the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) getting in the way of expanded Sino-Indonesian ties. Composing the background for reinvigorated bilateral exchanges are China’s emergence as the world’s second biggest economy and its desire for greater global influence motivating its economic outreaches to Indonesia. This courtship of Indonesia is set against an international environment that Beijing conceptualizes as “multipolar.” It accords with Indonesia’s ambition to strategically position itself at the center of the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and the development of an integrated regional ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) to become a “global maritime fulcrum” through enhanced logistics and transportation infrastructures.

The thesis of the paper is that both Indonesia and China have no

intention of challenging United States (US) Pacific power because they are firmly embedded within ASEAN-led regionalism, which is open, loose and welcoming of non-East Asian states' participation. These potential participants include the US, European Union (EU), Russia, Australia, etc. Due to this "open and loose" regionalism, business-like relations subject to market forces eclipse strategic considerations. Mutual commercial benefits, in other words, are emphasized rather than overriding political strategic concerns. To ensure that Beijing's assistance is not undermined by shifting winds in the domestic politics of aid recipients, Beijing needs to evaluate all capacity-building and developmental project funding according to market compatibility, sustainability and ethical rules. This logic applies to Indonesia if it applies for funding from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Funding must also avoid entanglement in sensitive geopolitical issues, otherwise its acceptability for Indonesia will be diminished.

Interestingly, bilateral relations between China and Indonesia (the two largest states in East Asia) have not unfolded naturally, instinctively or logically in the postwar era. In the age of decolonization, Mao's China and Sukarno's Indonesia, along with Nehru's India, enjoyed some form of fraternity as newly independent countries in the developing world characterized by resurgent nationalism. They each also had a cordial relationship with Stalin's postwar Soviet Union. But outside such political commonalities and ideological experiments with the non-aligned movement, a significant gap existed in economic linkages between China and Indonesia due to the emergence of the Cold War. Belonging to the socialist world, China experimented with self-sufficiency and ideological cultural revolutions while Indonesia continued trading with the capitalist world and remained integrated with and open to ideas from the West. China promoted self-reliance, massive top-down market-irrational heavy industrialization and socialist ideological orthodoxy. Indonesia remained open to trade and commerce even as it nationalized colonial-era state firms (the Sukarno years) in the

name of newfound nationalism in the decolonization era. China isolated itself from the globalized US-led capitalist system while Indonesia remained integrated, eventually receiving Japan's overseas developmental assistance for economic development.

In the Cold War, both China and Indonesia's political affiliations were ambiguous since they belonged to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM); neither wanted to be too close to the Soviet Union or the US-led free world. In fact, The NAM was declared in the Indonesian city of Bandung. Thus, the NAM powers set out to strike a middle path between the two superpowers. Over the course of the Cold War era, China went from staunch Stalinist Soviet ally to bitter enemy with Khrushchev's Soviet Union after the Sino-Soviet split. Shunned by both superpowers, it subsequently reformed its socialist economy to become a capitalist market economy in 1979 after rapprochement with Nixon's US and then Japan. In the meantime, Indonesia went from the Sukarno-era country friendly to both the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China (PRC) to anti-Communist non-aligned power in Southeast Asia and founding member of ASEAN, an anti-Communist regional organization in the early Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) years. (SEATO was formed to arrest the threat of Vietnamese communism spreading to Southeast Asia according to the logic of domino theory). Both countries had different economic trajectories but shared the desire to become non-aligned middle powers. It is likely this instinctual preference for non-aligned status as well as the self-awareness of past greatness currently pulling these two states together again.

Before the emergence of China among the leading global economic powers, its communist legacy ensured it would be less economically important to Indonesia compared to other large powers and major economies (especially Japan) in the free world. These countries proceeded to set up production networks with Indonesia, firmly rooting it in the world capitalist system. Japan set up facilities in Indonesia for commodity acquisitions (to feed Japan's manufacturing sector) and also

invested in the Indonesian manufacturing sector to jump-start its industrialization. In fact, before China's economic reforms, Indonesia was the largest recipient of Japanese Overseas Development Aid (ODA). It has remained, along with China, one of the two major recipients of Japanese loans, aids and financial help. Even today, Indonesia is working with Japan to build its Jakarta subway system and the largest coal-fired electricity generation plant in the region. In addition to tapping into Indonesia's rich resources, Japan's aiding of Indonesian industrialization and developing its economy reflects the interest in creating a large consumer market for Japanese products.

Fifteen years after Japan's economic bubble burst and rapid growth came to an end, China may be entering Indonesia for the same reasons as Japan. China's economic rise to become the world's second largest economy (by purchasing power parity) is motivating its economic outreaches to Indonesia in an international context it defines as "multipolar." In the Chinese worldview, this multipolar world system is conceptually ambiguous. It is neither a Chinese vassal state tributary international system (a Ming dynasty-era international system in which a contemporary regional power like Indonesia would never fit), nor a Cold War-style bipolar international world system (since neither China nor Indonesia are building up alliances and they are still incapable of challenging US supremacy). It is also not a balance of power system (since China openly declares it does not favor alliances and Indonesia is firmly embedded in ASEAN network that cannot accept any Northeast Asian member states but engages them through the ASEAN Plus Three [APT] mechanism). Given the non-synchronized nature of these outreaches, the current state of affairs can best be described with the term "economic diplomacy." There is no geopolitical alliance threatening to disturb or displace the current world system in a manner beneficial to both countries nor is there a hierarchical tributary relationship harking back to the Ming imperial dynasty, represented by Admiral Zheng He's voyages to Southeast Asia. This is a form of economic diplomacy based

on the growing interdependence between the two countries and the need to accommodate two important G-20 players with trillion-dollar economies and the increasing capability with respect to autonomous and independent decision-making in world affairs.

Although the economic relationship between China and Indonesia could originally be characterized as organic and laissez faire, embedded within multilateral, regional and bilateral frameworks, it is now being shaped and crafted by China's OBOR proposal, offering funding mechanisms like AIIB, the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) Bank and Silk Road Fund. The AIIB and OBOR have each become alternatives to funding options for loans and aid from the Asian Development Bank (ADB, where Tokyo traditionally exerts strong leadership), the World Bank (WB, where Washington has strong voting rights) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF, where Europeans and Washington are dominant). AIIB and OBOR are both dominated by China, although the Beijing-based AIIB has effectively become multilateralized after US allies like the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, South Korea and other Western European nations joined the organization. These institutions have ushered in a new age where Jakarta (and presumably most of the developing world) is able to choose between Western-led institutions, Japanese funding agencies and facilities, and now Beijing-backed banks and funding organizations to establish economic partnerships according to its national interests. This is an ideal situation for developing countries, assuming that OBOR and AIIB are successfully institutionalized in the coming years and decades. Economic diplomacy, in other words, has become pluralistic in nature, with multiple options bringing both opportunities and complications for funders as well as recipients. Given that AIIB is still new (signed into effect on June 30, 2015), Jakarta continues to rely on traditional partners like ADB, WB and IMF. But for certain projects like coal-fired electricity generation plants, Indonesia may seek funding from AIIB, which has less strictly prescribed environmental standards and conditions for issuing

loans.

There are three major schools of thought when it comes to Sino-Indonesian interests in the OBOR. The first school of thought is Sino-centric conceptually, looking at OBOR as an economic tool for China to export its overcapacity overseas as its domestic economy and domestic consumption slow down. For the Chinese, this export potential is strong and set to grow larger in the near future. This will consume excess goods manufactured in a slowing Chinese economy with weakening domestic demand as it readjusts its production structure to higher value-added industries. China's less developed western regions can also benefit from exporting excess production capacity westward to Central Asia and other new markets in the overland Silk Road region. The second major school of thought is based on the concept of connectivity. Indonesia is keen to connect its far-flung islands and AIIB offers the funds to do so. This connectivity can help the Indonesian islands to capitalize on growing intra-regional trade and move Indonesian manufactured goods faster for export to other countries. The third major school, related to each of the first two, centers on Indonesia's aspiration to become a "global maritime fulcrum." By improving its logistics and transportation infrastructures, Indonesia is trying to strategically position itself at the center of the MSR and the developing integrated ASEAN AEC region.

In all the above schools of thought, it is important to highlight the fact that neither China nor Indonesia is trying to displace the US. The de facto US-centered maritime trade route in place since the start of the postwar period has benefitted both countries, bringing them prosperity as export-led economies. Sea-lanes in East Asia were protected and kept open and free to merchant traffic by the US Pacific 7th Fleet and other military and security assets. As beneficiaries of these free sea-lanes and peace and stability under the US Pacific watch, China and Indonesia have much to gain from supporting the continuity of the MSR and maintaining freedom of navigation. Both countries are more concerned about their own national interests. For Indonesians, infrastructure

development is considered the main priority. This will make its national economy more competitive and requires tapping into different sources of funding such as the World Bank, IMF, ADB and now AIIB and other OBOR opportunities. For the Chinese, the MSR provides opportunities to deplete excess capacity while shoring up its rising influence overseas.

Both countries have no aspirations to compete with Washington directly. Consumed with their own developmental problems, moreover, they do not possess the capabilities of doing so. At the height of international media chatter about their competitive instincts and especially after the UK and other Western European countries and US allies decided to join the AIIB, the US expressed the possibility of working with AIIB through the WB, while China mentioned the possibility of joining the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP, a US-led regional trade pact) if conditions were right. In other words, the possibility exists to enmesh all these countries even further in an economically interdependent world made smaller by globalization. The economic diplomacy of China, particularly if Indonesia cooperates with these initiatives, does not have to produce a zero-sum game of economic competition for regional powers and for China and the US.

II. Methodology

To conduct research for this paper, I looked at primary documents such as the transcript of Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech to the Indonesian Parliament in Oct 2013. I also examined secondary resources like media reports. I analyzed these materials and examined their use of historical references to reveal contemporary narratives regarding the issue of Asian diplomacy. I paid especial attention to coverage of OBOR in *The Jakarta Post* (a popular Indonesian daily) to discern the mood among Indonesian intellectuals and elites, with a view to revealing Indonesian receptiveness to the initiative. I also examined articles in China's state-owned media to analyze official pronouncements and

narratives regarding the OBOR initiative related to Indonesia.

Analyzing elite leaders' speeches is a useful tool for uncovering broad intentions with respect to a global context. In the case of China, President Xi has continually centralized presidential authority. He has expressed the intention to add his own publications, ideas and initiatives to the official annals of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) around the time of the 6th Party Plenum (taking place at the time of this writing). Therefore, at this initial stage of the OBOR initiative, the broad outline Xi provides in his speeches maps out China's global intentions, enabling researchers to infer Indonesia's possible role in this global worldview. The outline also helps one to understand the process through which narratives found in Chinese worldviews are formulated and how international relations are managed in Beijing. In terms of the printed word, just as the Chinese state-owned press and propaganda materials provide valuable clues related to Chinese official thinking and ideas about state intentions, Indonesian publications like *Jakarta Post* read by the country's elites, including journalists, intellectuals, politicians and government officials, provide a survey of elite opinions. In this paper, I focus on the period around 2013 because President Xi's major foreign policy initiative, OBOR, was announced in that year. Xi declared that this would be his administration's only foreign policy initiative while he is in power. In October 2014, the current Indonesian President Joko Widodo came into power and announced major ambitions for Indonesia to become an international economic power and a reputable naval power in the Southeast Asian region. These two developments converge somewhat with the bilateral and regional developments examined in the paper.

I make no claim that the paper is comprehensive but endeavor to provide an analytical update on the state of Sino-Indonesian relations centered on the OBOR initiative. The paper is neither a history of pre-modern Southeast Asian history in the age of commerce but rather includes historical narratives as a means of investigating economic

diplomacy. In parts of the paper, I utilize world history as a theoretical framework to contextualize the discussions. I ask questions that transcend area studies and are applicable universally to all historical narratives and contexts. I try to frame historical narratives and questions within the contemporary context and compare them with the pre-modern world system. I ask the questions of what has changed over time and how this change impacts contemporary international relations. I also ask questions regarding how a state-based international system necessitates a critical analysis of synchronic ideas and whether narratives about bilateral exchanges are timeless and unchanging.

III. Selected Literature Review

For this paper, I examined some of the existing literature on Sino-Indonesian ties. In selecting the studies, I focused on those that restricted their analyses to the bilateral relationship, selecting mostly those from the last five years for the sake of contemporary relevance. For example, Anne Booth highlights how China rose from economic non-engagement with Southeast Asia in the early days of the Cold War to competing with ASEAN countries' export products in the lead-up to its entry into the WTO, before finally becoming a massive market for the exported commodities of Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia.¹ By 2010, Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, were under pressure from Chinese agricultural products and manufactured goods inundating Southeast Asian markets while their natural resources continued to feed Chinese production needs.² According to Booth, the following opinions are widely held in Indonesia:

¹ Anne Booth, "China's Economic Relations with Indonesia: Threats and Opportunities," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 30, no. 2 (2011): 141-160.

² *Ibid.*, 153.

Many Indonesians see it as leading to “cutthroat competition that will have negative impacts on the development of Indonesian economic capabilities in the long term” (Jakarta Post 2010). Others view Chinese policies as essentially neo-colonial; in its hunger for raw materials, China is in effect seeking to re-impose colonial patterns of trade on Southeast Asia. It is too early to tell if these fears are justified or not, but they appear to reflect widely held beliefs in Indonesian business, media and political circles.³

Booth is careful to note that these are but perceptions on the ground; it is still too early to tell if the fears of Indonesian entrepreneurs and other stakeholders in the Indonesian economy are legitimate. The charge of “neo-colonialism” is serious but may be exaggerated. Even perceptions may be carefully managed to prevent subjective opinions and interpretations from influencing policy decisions.

Since Booth’s article, written in 2011, China experienced a dramatic economic slowdown engendered by a brief meltdown in the Shanghai stock market in 2015 where three trillion US dollars were wiped out in a matter of weeks. This, however, has only been one part of the slowing growth since the Hu-Wen era, when the administration tried to dampen a red-hot speculative economy through deliberate policy designs (to prevent a speculative bubble from forming). By the time Xi ascended to power, the slowdown had accentuated, affecting domestic demand in the process. The question then became whether the slowdown in demand would trigger more Chinese exporters to shift their excess capacity and overproduction overseas to locations like Indonesia. Or perhaps the slowdown in China will conform to the scenario painted in *The Jakarta Post* (the same daily that Booth quoted in 2011) in 2015:

³ Ibid., 153-154.

True, as China has now become the largest supplier of our non-oil imports, many local companies have complained about the fierce competition posed by cheap Chinese products that have been flooding our markets. However, we should not be preoccupied with the negative side of booming China-Indonesia trade relations. Indonesia can now benefit more from the Chinese economy. Also true is that China's economy is slowing down, with its growth falling to about 7 percent from an annual average of 10 percent, but this slump will not last forever. As China's economy continues to expand, so will its middle-income earners, resulting in a huge pool of purchasing power. China will not only need various consumer goods from Indonesia but also will become a big supplier of millions of tourists as well. Indonesia can also benefit from China's position as a huge global production or assembly center within its complex, modularized global production systems.⁴

The commentary at this time is almost diametrically opposed to Booth's narrative. It acknowledges Booth's report on the fears on the ground in 2011 but rather emphasizes the benefits that outweigh such detriments. Indonesia, according to this view, is likely to benefit from the growing consumption of the Chinese middle class, Chinese tourists, and embeddedness in Chinese production networks. There are three caveats in navigating between the two diametrically opposite narratives. First, there is the unpredictability of economic development and, as a logical implication of this, economic diplomacy. Within a space of four years, the imagery presented by Booth of a resurgent China challenging the price-competitiveness of ASEAN goods was reduced to a slowing Chinese economy that still carries the prospects of voluminous consumption through two identifiably important groups of Chinese

⁴ "Editorial: \$3 billion boost from China," *The Jakarta Post*, September 18, 2015, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/09/18/editorial-3-billion-boost-china.html#sthash.PLLu5qfl.dpuf>, accessed September 19, 2015.

middle-class consumers and tourists. Ultimately, the two narratives may not be mutually exclusive. It may be possible for Chinese competition and longer-term consumption to co-exist in the future. In other words, China and its economy may not be either an unmitigated threat or benefit to Indonesia. Reality reflects a complex mixture of friendly competition and close partnership that needs to be constantly managed.

Second, both narratives indicate that Sino-Indonesia economic ties must be grounded in pragmatic business-like assessment of benefits and detriments rather than idealistic strategic closeness and partnership. Economic incentives and environmental factors are volatile and continually evolve. Interpretations of economic factors are diachronic, not synchronic. Any talk of absolutism, either in the form of alliances of economic “fulcrums” (central nodes and positions within a regional trading network) or head-on rivalry is premature. Beijing and Jakarta are firmly embedded in ASEAN-led regionalism, which is open, loose and welcoming of participation by non-East Asian states’ such as the US, EU, Russia, Australia, etc. Third, in both cases, the descriptions are superlative due to the size of the Chinese economy and the speed of its development in world historical terms. There is therefore a tendency for exaggerated perceptions, especially in the perceived areas of Chinese resource “hunger” (also known as “neo-colonialism”), its “huge” purchasing power, and the almost “infinite” millions of tourists and consumers.

Such perceptions also color popular ideas, images and impressions of the OBOR and MSR. Like all major economies, there are natural cyclical features of economic growth. While China’s rise is widely acknowledged, it is also slowing down dramatically as it enters into uncharted waters. Economic slowdown will continually test the resilience of its social system, society’s capacity for absorbing shocks, and an authoritarian political system that faces a vocal rising middle class. While China’s economy is slowing down, however, it is also true that, even at six to seven percent of annual growth, it is still performing

better than most developed economies this growth rate is equivalent to growing at the size of a major economy's GDP every few years. Many of these features are unprecedented in world history and the unexpectedness of China's rise also presents uncharted opportunities for bilateral interactions between regional powers like China and Indonesia.

To navigate through uncharted territories, China must skillfully deploy its economic and diplomatic resources. To understand the features of contemporary Chinese economic diplomacy, I reviewed policy papers in this area. Economic diplomacy is covered in Zha Daojiong's paper on China. He argues that the fifth generation of Chinese leaders is keen to expand multilateral trade with other countries while liberalizing its domestic economy to ensure the sustainability of growth and state-led investments overseas.⁵ He also claims that China also wants to draw Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).⁶ To expand its economic presence overseas, moreover, China "must win the trust and support of the international community of state."⁷ Relations between China and Indonesia can therefore be understood with respect to China's economic charm offensive to win over important pivotal regional economies for the smooth implementation of OBOR. One way to win trust in the East Asian context is to reach back into history and construct a narrative legitimizing an important and time-tested bilateral relationship.

In a co-authored article, John Wong and I describe China's turn to economic diplomacy prompted by the failure of "peaceful rise" discourse, a form of cultural diplomacy, to generate soft power.⁸ We note that economic diplomacy appeared more appropriate given China's large

⁵ Daojiong Zha, "Chinese Economic Diplomacy: New Initiatives," *Policy Report* (March 2011), 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11

⁸ John Wong and Lim Tai Wei, "The Economic Card in China's Pro-active Diplomacy," *National University of Singapore (NUS) East Asian Institute (EAI) Background Brief* No. 1021 (2015), i.

reserves, surpluses and need to acquire raw materials.⁹ Due to past lessons with regard to less successful bilateral funding initiatives, China is conducting economic diplomacy through multilateral institutions like AIIB and promoting cooperation in the developing world because it is now fully aware that economic diplomacy, or “buying states off,” can be obstructed when national interests change (recent experiences with Sri Lanka and Burma come to mind).¹⁰ China learned that the national interests of recipients of aids/loans/ODA may change but their desire to have the funding does not. Therefore, to ensure that its help is not subjected to the shifting winds of domestic politics, Beijing needs to evaluate all capacity-building and developmental project funding according to market compatibility, sustainability and ethical rules. This logic will also hold for Indonesia if it applies for AIIB funding.

IV. Significance of OBOR and AIIB to Contemporary Sino-Indonesian Bilateral Ties

Symbolically, Chinese President Xi Jinping chose Indonesia as the site to publicly announce the initiation of the new MSR on October third, 2013. It is important to carefully analyze President Xi’s speech to the Indonesian Parliament in October 2013 in detail to understand the vision that his administration has in store for Indonesia in the MSR and how China intends to shape the region with respect to its worldview. President Xi’s speech reveals much about the Sino-Indonesian friendship from a Sinocentric point of view. It considers Indonesia to have a “traditional friendship” with China and, despite the wide expanse of the South China Sea, Xi claims that China and Indonesia “face each other across the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., ii.

sea.”¹¹ In addition to such constructed geographical proximity, historical narratives were also deployed in President Xi’s speech:

As early as the Han Dynasty in China about 2,000 years ago, the people of the two countries opened the door to each other despite the sea between them. In the early fifteenth century, Zheng He, the famous Chinese navigator of the Ming Dynasty, made seven voyages to the Western Seas. He stopped over the Indonesian archipelago in each of his voyages and toured Java, Sumatra and Kalimantan. His visits left nice stories of friendly exchanges between the Chinese and Indonesian peoples, many of which are still widely told today.¹²

Three points stand out in this narrative. First, the invocation of the Chinese Han dynasty is extremely important. The Han dynasty was one of the golden eras of Chinese civilization as well as one characterized by a strongly unified China. Its significance to OBOR lies in the fact that the Han Chinese Empire successfully traded with the Roman Empire through numerous intermediaries in the Middle East and Central Asia. But what was emphasized here was really the maritime exchanges, which are objectively more relevant and more extensively recorded parts of Admiral Zheng He’s seven voyages to places around Southeast Asia, including Indonesia (where he is more commonly known as “Cheng Ho,” as in most of Southeast Asia). This is a strategic reference since Zheng He’s voyages are far better known in Indonesia than Han dynasty-era Chinese history. The past is revived in a re-packaged narrative for the present. Unlike Admiral Zheng He’s brief seven voyages, Beijing’s

¹¹ Jinping Xi (edited by Xu Rui), “Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament,” ASEAN-China Centre, October 3, 2013, http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm. accessed October 4, 2013. The speech was made on 2 October 2013 in Jakarta, Indonesia.

¹² Ibid.

intentions in maritime Southeast Asia are likely to be permanent and long lasting. Thus, substantive discontinuities are interwoven with constructed worldviews and visions of economic diplomacy.

How do Indonesian public intellectuals and scholars view the history of Chinese presence in Indonesia (including views from the culturally hybrid Peranakan community that descended from intermarriages between Chinese and indigenous Malays)? In terms of historical evidence, Chinese migration to Indonesia may have started as early as the fourth century (traceable using material artifacts), while Hokkien (Fujianese) traders may have arrived sometime around 800-900 AD. As well, evidence of early settlers in early Dutch-era Indonesia date back to 1619 AD in the port city of Makassar.¹³ Compared with this Indonesian interpretation, exchanges during the Han dynasty cited by Xi are dated two hundred years earlier. It also appears that the Indonesian perception associates sizable Chinese migration waves with the early Dutch presence at the end of the Ming period. It may be possible that Chinese migration occurred between 800 and 1644 AD (end of Ming). Meanwhile, Xi directly highlights the Zheng He voyages (1405-1433) that took place during the Ming dynasty (1368 to 1643).

Second, in the Sinocentric worldview, Zheng He's voyages often appear as peaceful voyages, in sharp contrast with narratives of Western imperialist and colonial ventures. These narratives portray the voyages as peaceful and diplomatic, with what little violence that did occur consisting of slight brushes with bandits and pirates. In other words, given the precedence of peaceful contact constructed through this narrative, Beijing is trying to convince Jakarta that contemporary exchanges are likely to yield the same level of mutual understanding and benefits. What is missing from this depiction, however, are Indonesian

¹³ Hermanto Lim, David Mead, and SIL International, "Chinese in Indonesia: A Background Study," *SIL Electronic Survey Report 2011-028* (2011).

ideas about the Chinese tributary relationship with its vassal states during the Ming period. More studies need to be done on Bahasa Indonesian literature on this early contact and how the locals received the Chinese.

Finally, the speech indicates how stories of Zheng He have circulated widely in Indonesia, becoming integrated into local myths and folklore. In fact, some Peranakan communities in Indonesia and even in the neighboring Malay Peninsula believe they are descendants of Zheng He's entourage left behind by the ships who proceeded to indigenize through intermarriage, eventually producing a hybridized culture in the region. Due to the cross-pollination of the two cultures, Peranakans are neither completely Chinese nor Malay and therefore ethnically unique. The hybridized cultures and people, along with artifacts left behind by Zheng He's voyages, have become cultural relics and archeological evidence that physicalize the narrative of the peaceful southward Ming voyages. They may serve as useful and effective bridges to construct stories and narratives for bilateral Sino-Indonesian ties. Stakeholders can use these stories to legitimize bilateral exchanges for popular consumption. For sustainability in economic exchanges, however, national interests will ultimately trump mythical folklore and historical anecdotes. Therefore, maximization of national interests remains paramount in any economic exchanges and initiatives.

All three points establish the fact that bilateral contacts are not new and thus have the potential to further develop upon the peaceful ties from past encounters. The narrative is synchronic in nature, occurring across time and space with little regard for changing contexts, world historical trends and national priorities. When Zheng He first arrived in Southeast Asia, he came into contact with disparate kingdoms with economies far less interdependent with one another. But President Xi is currently endeavoring to build Sino-Indonesian relations in a state-based international system where states with well-defined land and maritime territories are economically dependent on one another. National interests are therefore also more clearly defined and states themselves operate

under normative rules in a de facto international system existing since 1945. China also no longer has the same preponderance of power vis-à-vis Indonesia as it did in the Han and Tang dynasties. Modernity thus dictates Indonesian questions as to what constitutes its interest in OBOR.

The constructed nature of the Silk Road is a clear fact. It did not really exist but was conceptualized by a German geographer in the 1870s. He described the original overland as an organically developed caravan trading route that expanded over time, operated by myriad intermediaries and traders. In other words, the overland component of the OBOR is based on the concept of a European explorer that was later reinforced through official slogans by the Chinese government. The overland Silk Road declined with the rise of the Ottoman Empire that boycotted trade with the West and the isolationist late Ming dynasty China. The regions and kingdoms in the historical overland trading route known as the Silk Road was later supplanted by the maritime Silk Road when technologies allowed ships and other maritime vessels to carry more cargo. Logistics was further improved by the emergence of steamships that did not need to rely on wind power. A Japanese scholar who studied the maritime ceramics trade in the 1970s coined the term maritime Silk Road, or MSR. Therefore, in essence, both overland and maritime Silk Road were modern and contemporary constructs. Beijing's version of OBOR is a conscious state-constructed route. In this sense, it directly touches upon issues of national interest, sovereignty and geopolitical rivalries. China's official narrative regarding MSR, as outlined in a document jointly released by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and Ministry of Commerce (MOC), highlights the following route:

The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road attempts to link China's southeast coastal region—Fuzhou and Quanzhou in Fujian province, Guangzhou and Zhanjiang in Guangdong, Beihai in Guangxi and Haikou in

Hainan—to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean in one route, and the South Pacific in another. From Hanoi, Vietnam, the Road heads to the South China Sea and then the Strait of Malacca to reach Kuala Lumpur. It then joins Jakarta, Indonesia, before crossing the ocean to Colombo, Sri Lanka, and Kolkata, India. The path then swings west to Nairobi, Kenya, and continues north into the Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea to reach Athens, Greece, before joining the Belt finally in Venice.¹⁴

This MSR route resonates with the ancient Silk Road adhered to by Zheng, with the exception that the Ming-era route did not reach Europe; the Suez Canal did not exist then and Zheng probably did not sail round the horn of Africa to travel to Europe. Based on current available evidence, Zheng He probably reached the eastern coast of Africa (although Gavin Menzies' highly-controversial work extends Zheng's voyages beyond that). Given that modern technologies no longer depend on the monsoon winds that guided Zheng He's ships and others during the Ming period, the OBOR version of MSR is far more extensive and purposeful insofar as it is designed specifically to facilitate the transport of large amounts of cargo for trade and commerce. The overland and maritime routes including China and other economies found in the OBOR region encompass a total trade volume higher than 1.1 trillion US dollars, twenty-five percent of China's total trade volume by value.¹⁵ These routes have great potential to grow in the future from Hungary to Indonesia, and Chinese policy-makers estimate the OBOR will add an additional 2.5 trillion US dollars to China's trade volume over the period of 2015 to 2025, an amount greater than the total value of its exports in

¹⁴ Xin Yi Tho, "Silk Road Economic Belt - a journey without end," *The Jakarta Post*, April 10, 2015, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/04/10/silk-road-economic-belt-a-journey-without-end.html>, accessed April 11, 2015.

¹⁵ Ibid.

2013 as the globe's number one ranking exporter.¹⁶

China is not necessarily reviving a tributary version of economic diplomacy. One future shape of China's envisioned MSR is deep integration between Indonesia's maritime infrastructure facilities with China's production networking routes:

AIIB's share may mean that Indonesia's maritime highways and ports may become integral parts of China's MSR as well. Indonesia's sea lanes of communications will then be complemented by west-east connectivity, through the Java Sea to Makassar and Sorong in Papua and back, in further boosting Indonesia's maritime economic development. Indonesia's maritime highway concept may develop into the MSR super maritime highway.¹⁷

According to this interpretation of the MSR, there is complementarity between the MSR and Indonesia's own plans for economic development by connecting its far-flung archipelagic islands from East to West. Indonesia's port cities desire to be dynamic nodes of import-export trade as ASEAN and East Asia integrate economically with each other.

While trade integration through the OBOR and MSR can be characterized as development without detriment, in terms of geopolitics, this maritime region is a minefield of security risks. China's recent movement in the South China Sea resembles more closely modern-era naval gunboat supremacy and policing than a vassal state-based tributary system. Realizing the geopolitical risks of Chinese dominance in the OBOR region, Indonesia has taken several countermeasures. Luhulima,

¹⁶ Brenda Goh and Koh Gui Qing, "China's 'One Belt, One Road' looks to take construction binge offshore," *Reuters*, September 6, 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/09/06/uk-china-economy-silkroad-idUKKCN0R60X820150906>. accessed September 7, 2015.

¹⁷ C.P.F. Luhulima, "Superimposition of China's 'silk road' and Indonesia's maritime fulcrum," *Jakarta Post*, December 13, 2014, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/09/27/mutants-creating-superhumans-curing-incurable.html>, accessed April 1, 2015.

C.P.F., a senior researcher at the Center for Political Studies at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) based in Jakarta, suggests that Indonesia adopt the following countermeasures for balancing against China's strength in OBOR: lobbying for a few executive positions in AIIB to uphold Indonesian national interests in MSR; enhancing naval weapons and military systems to guard the sea-lanes under Indonesian jurisdiction; and monitoring naval movements in Indonesian maritime territories.¹⁸ Meanwhile, in a forum on OBOR in Nusa Dua, Bali, attended by officials and community representatives from China and ASEAN, Bantarto Bandoro of Indonesian Defense University asserted, "Indonesia should not allow itself to be used by China to persuade other ASEAN members to cooperate."¹⁹

My own contributions to the existing literature regarding this subject can be classified into three areas. First, much of the updated literature on Sino-Indonesian relations concerns the pre-OBOR historical period; in other words, it pertains to the era before the emergence of a Chinese-driven multilateral framework. Therefore, it focuses mainly on the issues of individual cases of resource extraction, Chinese investments, and bilateral developmental challenges. I argue that these aspects continue to be important objects of analyses but that the emergence of the OBOR initiative provides researchers with an overarching framework to situate Indonesia in a global map of Chinese economic outreach. In this respect, Indonesia systematically becomes part of a Chinese global strategy to manage its economic policy.

Second, strategic interests such as the current overwhelming focus on maritime disputes in contemporary media outlets and academic forums are not the only ways to discuss relations between the largest

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "In Indonesia, Caution Urged With China's New 'Silk Road' Plans," *Jakarta Globe*, <http://jakartaglobe.beritasatu.com/news/indonesia-caution-urged-chinas-new-silk-road-plans/>. accessed September 28, 2015.

states in Northeast and Southeast Asia, respectively. Focusing on economic mutualism may serve as a useful bilateral platform of analysis when it comes to assessing the national interests of various big powers active in the region and how emerging powers like Indonesia aggregate these interests. It also reflects the policy dilemma that Southeast Asian countries face, or the need to engage with China economically while maintaining security arrangements with the US and its network of allies that have a track record of guarding the sea-lanes and maintaining peace and stability in the region in the postwar years. Third, many publications tend to view economic closeness between Beijing and Jakarta in zero-sum terms, arguing that it shall result in the decline of Western (particularly US) influence in the region. I claim that this is not necessarily the case as bilateral exchanges based on mutual benefits, open and loose economic cooperation, and economic imperatives tend to be more accommodating of other large powers' interests and participation.

V. The ASEAN Framework

In the infrastructure sector, Indonesia's relationship with the OBOR can be contextualized in terms of overall ASEAN connectivity. Transportation infrastructure built and funded by the Chinese government can help to facilitate the already large numbers of people travelling between the two locations. As the *Jakarta Post* points out, eighteen million people travel annually between the two locations while students engaging in exchanges between China and ASEAN countries number more than 180,000.²⁰ Besides these interflows of people, investments also circulate between the two regions with ease. As with

²⁰ Bu Xu, "Maritime Silk Road can bridge China-ASEAN cooperation," *The Jakarta Post*, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/08/05/maritime-silk-road-can-bridge-china-asean-cooperation.html>. accessed August 6, 2015.

most of the countries in ASEAN, China has now become the single largest investor for Indonesia as well. And since Indonesia is the largest country within ASEAN, its policies, decisions, and actions have repercussions for other ASEAN members. For example, the competition between Japan and China to offer high-speed railway technologies was seen as a precedent for other railway projects in Southeast Asian countries. Ultimately, the project was cancelled in favor of a medium-speed railway. On September thirtieth, 2015, the Indonesian government announced China the winner in the bidding war to build the medium-speed railway. Jakarta hopes Indonesia can be more competitive when the Chinese-funded infrastructure project is completed. More specifically, it is hoped the project will aid logistics in the manufacturing sector and integrate industrial parks into Chinese production networks, just as was the case for Japanese production networking in the past.

In the service sector, like the rest of ASEAN, Indonesia also hopes for increases in Chinese tourists visiting the country. Mutual trade volume between China and ASEAN surpassed 480 billion US dollars in 2014.²¹ Like other ASEAN and Asia Pacific countries, Indonesia views the growing number of Chinese middle-class consumers as a potential market for Indonesian products. This imagery of a large number of middle-income consumers has captured the imagination of the Indonesian manufacturing sector. But for this dream to become reality, China must continue to grow and avoid the political instability causing implosions in its cyclical dynastic history. The CCP is already more than eighty years old and is searching for ways to shore up its political legitimacy at home, particularly if economic growth slows down in China. The OBOR is a crucial vehicle for China to export its surplus manufacturing capacity to other consumer markets. According to Hong Kong-based (sometimes critical) China watcher Willy Lam, a former

²¹ Ibid.

journalist turned academic, the main beneficiaries of OBOR are China's state-owned construction firms, including the following State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs): China State Construction Engineering Corporation Limited (CSCEC), a civil-engineering group that finished almost six thousand projects in 116 countries in the last thirty years; China Communications Construction Company Limited (CCCCL) constructing bridges, highways and ports in four continents; China CAMC Engineering Co. Ltd (CAMCE) engineering and construction firm; and the privately-owned SANY firm, among others.²²

VI. Domestic Interpretations by Indonesia-based China Experts

The historical narrative remains strong even in contemporary Sinologists' opinions in Indonesia. For example, prominent Indonesian Sinologist Agustinus Wibowo argues, "China is trying to emphasize its role in the global economy, as it used to be during the years of the Silk Road when China was the main hub and generator for the world's trade business."²³ The concept of revivalism is strong in such narratives, implying that the OBOR initiative is not entirely new; it has precedent in the historical overland Silk Road that used to connect the Han dynasty to the Roman Empire via intermediaries benefitting from trade. Confirming this historical narrative revivalism, Wibowo opines, "This [OBOR] is an initiative to connect China to its neighboring countries and civilizations, and at the same time to relive [sic] the ancient trade routes to the current

²² Willy Lam, "'One Belt, One Road' Enhances Xi Jinping's Control Over the Economy," *China Brief* 15, no. 10, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43914&cHash=859e508bc4e133a688b4ca5bd57bf1c2#.VgksE7GwqUk. accessed September 28, 2015. Willy Lam's original references are from For CSCEC - Finance Sector Net [Beijing], May 4 and the CSCEC website.

²³ Fan Ruan, "Indonesian Sinologist on China's 'One Belt, One Road' initiative," *China Daily*, http://m.chinadaily.com.cn/en/2015-07/13/content_21267230.htm. accessed September 27, 2015.

global setting.”²⁴ Such narratives indicate the presence of a group of scholars and intellectuals familiar with world historical views that use them to actively support Silk Road revivalism.

The historical narrative may be understood by Indonesian scholars who are well-acquainted with China but what about the opinions of Indonesian hawks, conservatives and liberals who may not share the same understanding as their Sinologist counterparts? Like any other major initiatives, AIIB and OBOR loans as well as other funding coming from China do encounter challenges. Indonesian businesses have complained about the highly price-competitive Chinese-made products flooding their markets. Others express worries about the geopolitical dominance of China, coming at a time when Indonesia is trying to assert itself as a naval power in the region. Even among moderates, there are anxieties about economic domination by China through the OBOR. Due to the simultaneous presence of Indonesian Sinologists, pro-China Indonesian elites, China hawks, moderates, Indonesian Chinese communities and various political factions, Indonesia has self-balancing mechanisms structurally built in to manage different ideas, viewpoints, perspectives and narratives about China. Such balancing mechanisms, when reflected in the collective outlook of Indonesian strategic thinking, result in a worldview that tends toward the separation of economics and politics. This is a phenomenon practiced by many states in the East Asian region when it comes to balancing the national interests of various big powers active in the region. It also reflects the policy dilemma that Southeast Asian countries face: the need to engage with China economically while maintaining security arrangements with the US and its network of allies, which have a track record of guarding the sea-lanes and maintaining peace and stability in the region since the postwar era.

²⁴ Ibid.

VII. Separation of Economics and Politics?

Sino-Indonesian economic relations are generally positive, smooth-going and growing. In the domain of security, like most other Southeast Asian states, Indonesia remains rational and neutral, in favor of ASEAN-led (“ASEAN in the driver’s seat”) regionalism within the status quo geopolitical order that has served the region well in the postwar decades. Maintaining this neutral position, Indonesia is likely to watch very carefully the development of OBOR and MSR in consideration of its own national interests. At times when Indonesian interests are violated, e.g. when Chinese, Vietnamese and other fishing trawlers are caught wandering into its waters, the fishermen are detained and their boats are dynamited. The MSR initiative also arrives at a time when Indonesia aspires to become a maritime power. President Jokowi’s administration declared Indonesia a “global maritime fulcrum.” It thus welcomes Chinese investments that boost the connectivity of its many islands, but rejects military dominance by China. Indonesia has skillfully pursued this balance in the past even at the height of the Cold War, procuring weapons from the Soviet Union, engaging politically and economically with Washington, projecting a non-aligned image as an important leading member in ASEAN, and accepting developmental assistance from Japan. Indonesia assumed these multiple identities simultaneously. In that sense, it acted as a big power fulcrum balancing the interests of even larger and/or more powerful states. There is no reason to argue against Indonesia’s continued success in this regard into the near future, even in the face of China’s rise and the OBOR/AIIB initiatives.

Indonesia also has newfound confidence as a trillion dollar economy within the increasingly influential G-20. This is in addition to its traditional role as a “big brother” within the ASEAN family. Indonesia may thus continue to highlight its autonomous role in the international community along with other large rapidly developing economies. Ultimately, nations in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia’s pre-modern

historical empires and kingdoms, have been skillful and experienced in managing big power relations. These nations are located in a region that has seen the arrivals of Indic empire builders, Arab traders and missionaries, European colonial empires, American naval supremacy, Japanese Empire, and now the rise of China. Drawing on its historical experience and accumulated cultural capital, Indonesia is likely to develop and evolve a system suitable to contemporary conditions in order to counterbalance Chinese dominance and influence in the region. This role is especially important considering the suspicion of some observers regarding the underlying geopolitical intentions of OBOR:

Although Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has stated that One Belt, One Road is “not a tool of geopolitics,” China will likely attempt to turn economic cooperation into political influence. Doing so will require Beijing to overcome a number of difficult obstacles, primarily, managing great power competition with India, Russia, and the United States within Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East.²⁵

That region which this Foreign Affairs article does not mention is Southeast Asia, where Indonesia is a major actor. If OBOR becomes predominantly geopolitical in its application in Southeast Asia, Indonesia is likely to display its competitive instincts to resist or reject OBOR advances.

Meanwhile, as ASEAN members ponder optimal ways to benefit from AIIB and OBOR while maintaining their respective national interests and priorities, China appears to be enthusiastically forging ahead with the overland Silk Road route. It is working with Pakistan (where it allocated forty billion US dollars for development) and other

²⁵ Jacob Stokes, “China’s Road Rules Beijing Looks West Toward Eurasian Integration” *Foreign Affairs*, April 19, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2015-04-19/chinas-road-rules>, accessed September 29, 2015.

countries in Central Asia. This is a region friendlier to China compared with Southeast Asia, which has traditionally worked more with Western countries through close cooperation in the postwar and Cold War periods. There is also a degree of familiarity due to inherited institutions as former European colonies (Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia that was not colonized). China is a relatively new player in Southeast Asia. It withdrew from meddling in Southeast Asian, and especially Indonesian, internal affairs after anti-Chinese riots in the 1960s that resulted in China denying ethnic overseas Chinese in the region citizenship eligibility in the PRC. Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia were offered a choice either to return to China (some did and ended up in places like Hainan Island) or stay in Indonesia to become citizens and give up their rights to PRC citizenship. China also stopped propaganda broadcasts to Southeast Asia when it opened up economically in its transition to a market economy in the reform era. Furthermore, compared to the MSR traversed by Zheng He over seven voyages, the overland route is historically more familiar to Chinese historians. Ultimately, as Indonesia considers its national interests with regard to becoming a maritime fulcrum in the region through an economic and trade relationship with China, the latter is also carefully calibrating its funding priorities and apportioning its attention and resources between the overland and the maritime components of the OBOR.

In conclusion, I argue that economic mutualism is a better lens to understand national interests. As Indonesia transitions to become a maritime fulcrum in the region, China is examining its priorities with respect to the overland and maritime components of OBOR. Meanwhile, Indonesia is fully aware of the long-term geopolitical impact if the OBOR turns economic into geopolitical power. OBOR must maintain its economic development focus and avoid the use of political tools to dominate Southeast Asian countries. National interests are the overriding determinants of bilateral complementarity and compatibility and they can assert themselves easily when challenged.

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