Assessing China's Economic Influence in Indonesia: The Case of Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail

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Introduction

The question of how a rising power wields its influence is especially relevant considering the recent rise of China. China's economic development has afforded Beijing a newfound power, evident in its growing importance as a trade and investment partner with countries across the globe, leading participation in new multilateral financial institutions such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and especially, spearheading overseas investment through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China is one of the prime economic partners for Indonesia, both in international trade and foreign direct investment. On trade, China is now both Indonesia's largest export market and its largest source of import destinations. On investment, from a meagre position in the 1990s, China has overtaken Japan as the second largest foreign direct investor in Indonesia since 2017.[1]

Since its inception, Indonesia has been an eager participant of China, with President Xi Jinping touting the initiative to Indonesia's People's Representative Council in its early days in October 2013.[2] Ever since, various Chinese projects in Indonesia has fallen under the Belt and Road framework. The Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail (HSR) project is arguably

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the most visible of the Belt and Road projects in Indonesia and can serve as a window to understand Chinese influence in Indonesia. It represents a high point of cooperation between Jakarta and Beijing on infrastructure and cooperation and involves various Indonesian and Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

This article aims to assess how China wields its economic influence in Indonesia, using the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project as a case study. It analyzes how China utilizes Indonesian state-owned enterprises as avenues for its influence activities. The first section will lay the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis: its nature, methods, and goals between China and Indonesia. The second section will elaborate on the likely channel through which China employs its influencing activities—i.e., Indonesian state-owned enterprises. The third section will analyze the Jakarta-Bandung HSR as a case study of China's economic influence in Indonesia. And finally, the last section concludes by offering summary of the findings and some recommendations on the way forward.

Thinking about China's Economic Influence

This first section will attempt to establish a theoretical framework on China's economic. There is a rich literature on the use of economic influence in the form of inducements and coercion for political gains in international affairs. The so-called "Hirschman logic" asserts that economic logic would create vested interests that would advocate for foreign policies that do not antagonize key trading partners.[3] This effect may be more prevalent for smaller economies, which will bear higher adjustment costs due to asymmetric bilateral economic integrations.[4] A prime example of this is the relationship between Russia and former Soviet countries.

Building on these themes, Flores-Macias and Kreps studied the foreign policy convergence of countries given their trade dependence on China.[5] Using a panel data of UNGA roll call vote from 1992 to 1996, they found that the more trade a country conducted with China, the higher the chance for foreign policy convergence between a country and China. Kastner expanded on this finding by examining trade dependence and linking it to economic and political issues considered central to China.[6] Using cross-sectional data, he found that on economic issues—China's market economy status, trade dependence with Beijing exerted a strong influence on countries.

International influence can be defined as an act of altering another actor's behavior or preferences in favor of one's own goals.[7] As different actors posses different resources and employ different tools, the use of which tool depends on the available resources and channels. The resources deployed could range from material (e.g., military, natural resource endowment, economic, technology), ideational (e.g., culture), or they could be positional (e.g., its hierarchy in global order).[8] Mobilizing these resources through the available channels shall henceforth be referred to as "influence activities".

The methods employed by the influencing actor can range from *reward* (inducement), *punishment* (coercion), and *affective* (persuasion or "perception-shaping") tools at its disposal.[9] Reward is about causing the target actor to behave in a particular way by offering an inducement. Punishment concerns policies to compel the target to do something by credibly demonstrating the costs of its failure to do so. And persuasion is about the influencing country convincing the target that its interests are aligned with the former.

One might assume that by definition, goals of the influencing actor and its influencing activities are different from those of the targeted actor. This particularly follows logically if one reasons that there is an expected behavioral or perception change from the influence activities. In the case of China, however, preferences with the targeted state are often aligned to begin with, especially for influencing activities in economic domain. On the one side, China likely aims to use its economic relations with strategic goals in mind. On the other side, apart from development purposes, the target country's political elites might view China-funded investments as rent-seeking occasions.[10] In this case then, there is preference alignment between Beijing and the target country.

In instances of preference alignment, there is no need for China to push for a change in the target's behavior or perception. What takes place is Beijing reinforcing those preferences by embarking on joint actions, common goals, or shared cooperation projects.[11] Due to the economic ties between China and Southeast Asia, preference alignment most likely dominates influencing activities. It follows as well that between China and Southeast Asia, the influencing activities present themselves in the form of persuasion.[12] As will be elaborated in the following section, Indonesia's oligarchy-dominated domestic politics seem to fit this mold, especially in its state-owned enterprises.

China and Indonesian State-Owned Enterprises

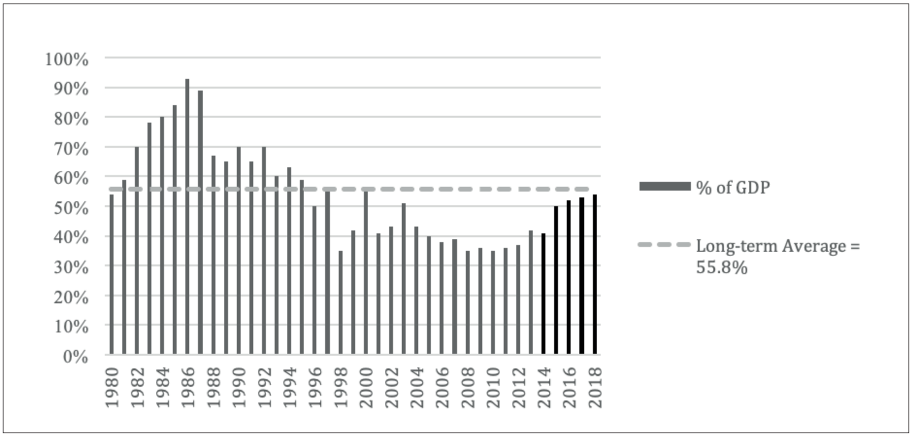
This second section will elaborate on the avenue through which China is likely to implement its influencing activities: Indonesian state-owned enterprises. It will provide an overview of the dominance of state-owned enterprises in Indonesia's economy and present some evidence of the ties between Indonesian SOEs and Chinese companies, both private and state-owned.

The Commanding Heights of Indonesia's Economy

Many of China's foreign direct investment in Indonesia are within the framework of joint ventures with at least one Indonesian company and in turn, many of these Indonesian companies are state-owned enterprises. The Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project itself, for example, is currently being constructed by PT Kereta Cepat Indonesia-Cina (KCIC), a consortium of China Railways with a slate of Indonesian SOEs (PT Kereta Api Indonesia, Wijaya Karya, PTPN VII, and Jasa Marga) under Presidential Regulation (Perpres) No. 107/2015. This brings us neatly into the need to understand the interactions between Indonesian SOEs and China.

The prominence of SOEs is no new phenomenon in the Indonesian economy. As highlighted in Figure 1, the recent return of the prominence of SOEs represents a return to the historical norm. The declining role of *Badan Usaha Milik Negara* (BUMN) in the late 1990s and early 2000s seems to be a historical aberration, a result of the reformist push post-1998 Asian Financial Crisis. Cumulatively, the assets of Indonesian SOEs have been representing, on average, more than half of the country's GDP.

Figure 1. Assets of Indonesian SOEs relative to GDP, 1980-2018



Source: Kim (2019) *Indonesia's Restrained State Capitalism: Development and Policy Challenges*

In line with its dominance of Indonesia's economy at large, Indonesian SOEs are not simply confined to the economy's "commanding heights"; their diversity ranges from aviation, mining and energy, banking, publishing, utilities, and of course, infrastructure and transportation. The infrastructure push under President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) has been in the form of direct appointment and capital injections from the state budget to SOEs. Other experts have noted the particular features of this trend, especially in addition to its emphasis on deregulation, coined as 'new developmentalism' by Eve Warburton.[13]

It is thus crucial to understand the interactions between Indonesian SOE and Chinese private and state-owned companies. Through their mere size in Indonesian economy, the breadth and depth of the Indonesia-China interactions could be uncovered. Through their connections to the central government, SOEs could act as channels of both direct and indirect influence by China towards Indonesia. Utilizing the annual financial reports of these SOEs and media coverage, the following presents a fuller extent of Indonesia-China economic relations and thus potential avenues for influence beyond the macroeconomic headlines through Indonesian SOEs ties to Chinese companies.

Binding Ties between Beijing and Indonesian SOEs

The business ties documented below were from 2010 to 2020. At the beginning of the research period, there were 128 documented SOEs, shrinking to 121 companies at the end due to restructuring and/or acquisition by other Indonesian SOEs. The first finding is that 85 out of 121 Indonesian had publicly disclosed business interactions with Chinese companies. The majority of these business ties are in the form of export-imports, followed by loans, and then joint ventures. Within export-import, most of these ties are dominated by the export of Indonesian commodities to China, followed by imports of capital goods from China. An example is the 2017 imports of rolling stock by PT KAI from CRRC Sifang, related to the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project.

Furthermore, business loans from China to Indonesian SOEs predominantly came from Chinese policy, with some private sector involvement, either as individual entities or as part of syndicate loans with public or policy banks. China Development Bank (CDB) commanded this scene, although there was significant presence from the Export-Import Bank of China as well. The latter was especially prominent in the provision of credit to PT PLN—i.e., the Indonesian state monopoly electricity generation and distribution company—during the later years of President Jokowi's first term.[14] And finally, joint ventures between Chinese companies and Indonesian SOEs are mostly in the sectors of mining and energy and infrastructure and transportation. The participation of Chinese rail companies has been highlighted by the high-speed rail project, but Chinese companies were also significant players in the construction and service of highways through joint ventures with Indonesian SOEs.[15]

The board of directors and commissioners of these Indonesian SOEs were also surveyed. Appointed by the President, these hailed from diverse backgrounds such as political party officials, bureaucrats who rose through the ranks, retired armed forces, and businessmen. The focus here is on the businessmen who sat on the board of directors and commissioners of these SOEs and investigated their past and existing private companies' ties to Chinese companies. Out of a total 1.160 directors and commissioners, this study identified 65 businessmen with former and current ties and ownership with their respective private companies. In turn, the second finding here is that there were 10 out of 65 businessmen with publicly disclosed ties to Chinese companies.

The patterns of the ties between these private Indonesian with Chinese companies broadly follow the patterns of Indonesian SOEs with Chinese companies. First, export-import business dominates, with an emphasis on the export of commodities from Jakarta to Beijing. For example, Paulus Pranonto who is now at the SOE PT Surveyor Indonesia has been affiliated with PT Toba Sejahtera, which exports coal to China.

Their coal exports to the Chinese market represented 11% of their total sales in 2019.[16] Second, funding in the form of credit and equity for these private companies mostly came from Chinese private sources, unlike from policy banks in the case of SOEs. The funding from Tencent to PT Aplikasi Karya Anak Bangsa (Gojek) in 2017 came to mind.[17] Third, for joint ventures, the sectors that predominate were property and real estate.

Exploring Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail

This third section will explore the Jakarta-Bandung HSR as a case study of China's economic influence in Indonesia. The Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail is arguably the most visible of the Belt and Road projects in Indonesia and can serve as a window to understand Chinese influence in Indonesia. Specific trends from the planning, construction, and execution of the high-speed rail project can be induced to gauge the ways China exercised its economic influence and the Indonesian source of resilience.

About the Project

The project under construction would be Indonesia's first high-speed rail and China's first overseas high-speed export. It would connect Halim in East Jakarta to Tegalluar station in the outskirts of Bandung through 4 stations with plans for transit-oriented development around each station. The project would cut travel time by train from around 3 hours into just 46 minutes. Funded from a $5,5 billion loan from CDB, the project is currently under construction from a joint venture of China Railways with a slate of Indonesian SOEs: PT Kereta Api Indonesia, Wijaya Karya, PTPN VII, and Jasa Marga. This joint venture came to be called PT Kereta Cepat Indonesia-Cina (KCIC).

The appointment of China as a partner in the construction followed a high-profile bidding war to build the first high-speed rail in Indonesia and Southeast Asia between Japan and China. Groundbreaking started on January 21, 2016, in Walini, West Java. As the tradition goes in Indonesia's infrastructure construction, it has been hampered by land acquisition problems, with CDB initially requiring that all 100% of the land procurement process finished before loan disbursement.[18]

Construction of the project has come late beyond its original deadline in 2019. The coronavirus pandemic in 2020 later provided a convenient scapegoat. As of July 2022, physical construction progress reached 76%.[19]

With early 2023 as the most realistic start of commercial operations, West Java Governor Ridwan Kamil announced in April 2022 that technical tests on the Jakarta-Bandung HSR will most likely take place in November the same year to coincide with the upcoming G20 Summit that Indonesia was chairing.[20] It is also important to note that the project has gone over-budget by an estimate of IDR 27,17 to 113,9 trillion, which was acknowledged due to overoptimistic planning, poor project management, and land acquisition problems. While before there was an insistence that no state budget to be used and that this was a purely business-to-business venture, Presidential Regulation No. 93/2021 allows the government to use its fiscal discretion to plug the project's finances.[21]

Weighing China's influence in Jakarta-Bandung HSR

First, one can argue that due to the competitive bidding process between Jakarta and Beijing caused Indonesia to acquire a better deal from China. Jakarta got Beijing to push for a no-government guarantee on the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project. Early in the bidding process, both offers from Tokyo and Beijing required this guarantee until the latter dropped it. Minister Rini asserted this as the crucial winner: "Japan's proposal includes a request for a government guarantee, but China doesn't require that. That's the main difference."[22] It is important to note that since the consortium of Indonesian companies that built the project are SOEs anyway, whether in practice indirectly the central government committed any funding to the project is questionable. Indonesia also got China to commit in the project contract for a local-Chinese worker ratio. There is clause that stated the ratio of Chinese to local workers is 1:4—i.e., for every one Chinese worker, there needs to be 4 Indonesian workers on the project.[23] According to PT KCIC, the project has been employing 15,487 workers, of which around 87% were local workers, as of January 2022.[24]

Officials seemed to be aware of this leverage early in the process. To wit, on the bidding competition between China and Japan to build Indonesia's first high-speed train, Minister Luhut bluntly stated: "Let them race to invest in Indonesia. It's good for us."[25] It is unclear whether this competitiveness as leverage can be found across the board as a source of Indonesian resilience against influence. Not all sectors invite such eager participation such as high-speed rail investment. Both Japan and China had a strategic interest in exporting their high-speed rail so their respective domestic industry can go beyond their national borders.

To its credit, Jakarta used this to gain a better deal for its benefit. But it is crucial to note here that the source of this resilience is the existence of an external competitive party as leverage, not an inherent domestic institutional capacity.

Second, the arbitrary project planning and opaque tender process could result in significant technical challenges and might decrease the supposed economic benefits. The opaque tender process has been nothing short of legendary. After first seemingly getting the upper hand for funding the feasibility study through JICA, Tokyo was caught unaware at how fast Beijing's consultations have been with Jakarta, particularly Ministers Luhut and Rini. The project was later cancelled abruptly by President Jokowi and not long after revived as a medium-speed rail won by China. This has resulted in diplomatic tension with Tokyo at the time and could decrease Indonesia's attractiveness as an investment destination for Japanese companies.

The planning process has been chaotic and might present environmental risks going forward. In Indonesia, an environmental impact assessment (EIA) for a project of this magnitude usually takes around 12-18 months. The EIA for the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project was done only a week.[26] Earlier, Public Works and Housing Minister Basuki Hadimuljono raised concerns that of safety along the railway route. Minister Rini retorted, "do not doubt China", adding that the Chinese companies possessed the technical experience with such geological conditions.[27] Later in early 2020, flooding was reported in the areas surrounding the tunnel and elevated construction zones. West Bandung regent Aa Umbara Sutisna stated, "There were no floods before the KCIC project. The West Bandung administration is not responsible for the floods; it should be the high-speed railway project."[28]

The arbitrary planning process has also been translated into technical details that might decrease the economic benefits. Due to costs, the end stations for both Jakarta and Bandung are located in the outskirts of both cities: Halim and Tegalluar, respectively.[29] As people would need to travel to and from these outskirts before and after they embark on the train, this would be a negative consideration for people using the service. Upon its opening, it was projected that the number of passengers would be 61,000 per day, rising to 135,000 per day by 2050, based on China's previous offer when the end station was planned to be located in the downtown. And furthermore, this was still likely to be over optimistic. The existing Jakarta-Bandung conventional rail route boasted only around 3.000

passengers daily, rising to 4.000 on weekends.[30] With such station locations and potential rail passengers, it is unclear how these passenger projections could be met.

This arbitrary and opaque process can act as an entry point for influence, although on separate occasions, this can be a source of resilience. It is easy to see a scenario in which CDB holding up loan disbursement based on ambiguity in the early processes. On the other hand, this may allow government officials or institutions to intervene when such CDB scenario takes place. At this point in the research, we reserve final judgment on the matter, although we lean towards this being a vulnerability as an influence entry point. Above all, this points to a lack of institutionalization in the planning and project procurement process.

Third, related to this arbitrary process, the electoral cycle did play a role in the high-speed rail project. Many officials privately admitted the fact that President Jokowi wanted this project to finish by mid-2019 was so that it could finish before his reelection that year, as a showcase of his infrastructure drive. The Japanese offer, on the other hand, was due to finish by 2022 at the earliest. Indeed, this and the lack of government guarantee in the Chinese offer were said to be the crucial factors for making the project going to China. Now that the project was not to finish by early 2022 at the earliest, the Japanese seemed realistically prescient and the President's calculation of this project's political benefit to be way off. Fortunately for him, his overestimation of Beijing's ability to deliver has not cost him much and he has won reelection for the second term anyway. And in an ironic twist, before his reelection, President Jokowi did manage to showcase his infrastructure achievement in the Jakarta MRT, spearheaded back during his days as a Jakarta mayor and largely funded by the Japanese.[31]

The fact that an infrastructure project hinges on the electoral schedule of the president approving it clearly speaks to the vulnerability of Indonesia to influence. It is unclear how the Chinese themselves understood this dynamic during the tender process for the high-speed rail project. Both this electoral cycle consideration and the lack of government guarantee decisively tipped the scale for Beijing against Tokyo. Future Chinese investment projects clearly could exploit this fact in advancing the Chinese own's interests over Indonesia.

Concluding Remarks

In sum, Indonesian SOEs are prime avenues for influence activities by external actors, particularly with China, in the economic domain. The business entanglements between SOE board of directors and commissioners with Chinese companies have been prevalent. This especially implies the direct and indirect ties between these SOEs themselves and the Indonesian government. Second, the Jakarta-Bandung HSR has been a case of preference amplification as an influence activity by China towards Indonesia. It is an instance where authorities in Jakarta (e.g., electoral concerns and infrastructure development goals) through its SOEs and Beijing through its businesses and policy banks (e.g., export of high-speed rail infrastructure) complement one another in their preferences. Consequently, inducement and persuasion have been the manner in which resources were deployed and the method by China in its influence activities.

Third, the tender, planning, and construction processes of the project have not boded well for Indonesia for its resilience as a targeted country in influence activities. The tender did show Indonesia's leverage in getting its preferences (i.e., no government guarantee) was due to the existence of an alternative, competitive bidder (i.e., Japan). Apart from slowing project progress, endangering the environment, and not maximizing the project's economic benefits, the top-down approach and capricious planning in the project exhibited vulnerabilities that other influencing actors might be able to exploit in the future.

As a way forward, two recommendations could be useful to increase Indonesia's resilience to influence activity by external actors within economic realm. First, reform of corporate governance among Indonesian state-owned enterprises. A more transparent SOE corporate environment based on merit-based decision-making can assist in ensuring that long term international cooperation will be based on merit and need, rather than political expediency that is vulnerable to rent-seeking by elites. Second, government project transparency across the board, regardless of whether the contractor is a state-owned enterprise. This should comprehensively cover all levels of the project process, including the tender process, construction implementation, and public disclosure of boards of directors and commissioners regarding potential conflict-of-interests. Apart from ensuring an attractive investment climate, a transparent project process could help ensure that actors cannot deploy influence activities and insert their preferences arbitrarily into the project.

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