

China's Multi-Stakeholder Engagement in Indonesia via Development-Driven Public Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines China's "development-driven" public diplomacy in Indonesia, focusing on how economic initiatives, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), strategically engage the multi-stakeholder ecosystem comprising Academia, Business, Government, Community, and Media (ABGCM). This study employs a qualitative case study approach, analyzing three BRI projects in Indonesia (Luban Workshops, Jakarta-Bandung HSR, Morowali Industrial Park) as empirical cases. Data was triangulated from multiple secondary sources, including government reports, academic publications, NGO assessments, media, and corporate documents. Drawing on the Penta Helix framework, the study argues that China utilizes tangible development projects, such as Luban Workshops, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail, and the Morowali Industrial Park, as deliberate platforms to shape Indonesian perceptions, strengthen bilateral ties, and advance its strategic goals. Analysis reveals that this multi-stakeholder engagement results in uneven effectiveness and inherent contradictions. While these initiatives often deliver discernible economic benefits and foster positive sentiment in certain quarters, particularly strengthening Government-to-Government (G-G) and Business-to-Business (B-B) ties, they simultaneously produce significant negative externalities, social friction, environmental degradation, and public skepticism. The effectiveness varies across cases and ABGCM pillars; Luban Workshops show positive outcomes with targeted groups. HSR and IMIP face substantial negative feedback from the Community, Media, and NGOs due to implementation issues and social/environmental costs. The study highlights those Indonesian stakeholders who actively mediate outcomes. It contributes a nuanced understanding of how development functions as a public diplomacy tool within a complex domestic context and the challenges of balancing economic objectives with achieving broad social acceptance and legitimacy.

Keywords: *China, Indonesia, public Diplomacy, Belt and Road Initiative, multi-stakeholder engagement*

Tulisan ini mengkaji diplomasi publik Tiongkok berorientasi pada pembangunan di Indonesia, dengan fokus pada bagaimana inisiatif ekonomi—khususnya dalam kerangka Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—secara strategis melibatkan ekosistem multi-pemangku kepentingan yang terdiri dari Akademisi, Bisnis, Pemerintah, Komunitas, dan Media (ABPKM). Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, menganalisis tiga proyek BRI di Indonesia (Luban Workshops, Kereta Cepat Jakarta-Bandung, Kawasan Industri Morowali) sebagai kasus empiris. Data diperoleh melalui triangulasi dari berbagai sumber sekunder, meliputi laporan pemerintah, publikasi akademik, penilaian LSM, media, dan dokumen perusahaan. Dengan menggunakan kerangka Penta Helix, studi ini berargumen bahwa Tiongkok memanfaatkan proyek-proyek pembangunan, seperti Luban Workshop, Kereta Cepat Jakarta-

Bandung, dan Kawasan Industri Morowali, sebagai platform yang disengaja untuk membentuk persepsi publik Indonesia, memperkuat hubungan bilateral, dan mendorong pencapaian tujuan strategisnya. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan multi-pemangku kepentingan ini menghasilkan efektivitas yang tidak merata serta sarat kontradiksi. Meskipun inisiatif-inisiatif tersebut sering kali memberikan manfaat ekonomi yang nyata dan mendorong sentimen positif di kalangan tertentu—terutama dalam memperkuat hubungan antar pemerintah (G-to-G) dan antar pelaku usaha (B-to-B)—mereka juga menghasilkan eksternalitas negatif yang signifikan, gesekan sosial, kerusakan lingkungan, dan skeptisisme publik. Efektivitasnya bervariasi tergantung pada kasus dan pilar ABPKM; misalnya, Luban Workshop menunjukkan hasil yang positif pada kelompok sasaran tertentu, sementara proyek Kereta Cepat dan Kawasan Industri Morowali menghadapi banyak kritik dari Komunitas, Media, dan LSM akibat masalah implementasi serta dampak sosial dan lingkungan. Studi ini menyoroti peran aktif para pemangku kepentingan Indonesia dalam memediasi hasil-hasil tersebut. Tulisan ini memberikan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam mengenai bagaimana pembangunan berfungsi sebagai alat diplomasi publik dalam konteks domestik yang kompleks, serta tantangan dalam menyeimbangkan tujuan ekonomi dengan pencapaian penerimaan sosial yang luas dan legitimasi.

Kata kunci: *China, Indonesia, diplomasi publik, Belt and Road Initiative, keterlibatan multi-pemangku kepentingan*

Introduction

The contemporary landscape of international relations is increasingly characterized by the fusion of economic statecraft and public diplomacy, where nations strategically leverage economic initiatives to shape perceptions and build relationships. China's foreign policy, particularly towards the Global South, exemplifies this trend, placing growing emphasis on development cooperation as a primary tool for cultivating influence and fostering deeper ties (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2025). Within this dynamic, Indonesia emerges as a nation of pivotal importance. As Southeast Asia's largest economy and the world's fourth most populous country, its strategic location astride key maritime routes makes it an indispensable partner for Beijing, particularly within the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework (Antika et al., 2025). The China-Indonesia relationship, however, is layered with historical complexity. It has oscillated between periods of close alignment, particularly during the Sukarno era, and decades of deep suspicion following Indonesia's anti-communist purges that occurred in 1965-1967, which led to the suspension of diplomatic ties until normalization in 1990, driven significantly by economic pragmatism and China's burgeoning economic power (Zulkarnain & Indrayani, 2022).

This complex backdrop presents a compelling puzzle regarding China's contemporary engagement strategy. How does a major global power like China operationalize its "development-driven" public diplomacy within the intricate domestic political and social fabric of a key partner nation like Indonesia? Understanding the Indonesian context requires acknowledging its diverse and influential domestic actors. The Academia, Business, Government, Community, and Media (ABGCM) model, derived from the Penta Helix framework for innovation ecosystems, provides a helpful lens for analyzing this multi-stakeholder environment (Sudiana et al., 2020). This framework recognizes that the interactions and collaborations (or conflicts) among these five key societal pillars shape national development and policy outcomes. This leads to the central research question guiding this paper: How do specific instances of China-Indonesia collaboration, exemplifying interactions across the Academia, Business, Government, Community, and Media (ABGCM) pillars and often linked to development initiatives like the Belt and

Road Initiative, contribute to shaping Indonesian perceptions of China, fostering bilateral ties, and advancing China's strategic goals?

This paper argues that China strategically employs tangible development projects, predominantly under the BRI umbrella, as platforms for public diplomacy. These initiatives are designed for economic outcomes and actively engage and influence diverse actors within Indonesia's ABGCM framework. The intention is to cultivate favorable perceptions, strengthen bilateral relations at multiple levels, and advance China's broader strategic interests. However, the analysis reveals that the effectiveness of this development-driven approach is decidedly uneven. While generating discernible economic benefits and fostering positive sentiment in certain quarters, these projects simultaneously produce significant negative externalities, social friction, environmental degradation, and public skepticism. This led to a complex, often contradictory impact on bilateral relations and China's image within Indonesia.

The significance of this research lies in its nuanced examination of how a major power utilizes development cooperation as a public diplomacy tool within the complex, multi-stakeholder environment of a key developing nation. By integrating the ABGCM framework, the study moves beyond traditional state-centric or generalized public diplomacy analyses to explore how China engages diverse domestic actors. The novelty stems from its focus on concrete examples of multi-stakeholder collaboration—specifically, vocational training programs (Luban Workshops), flagship infrastructure (Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail), and large-scale industrial investment (Morowali Industrial Park)—as deliberate instruments of public diplomacy. These case studies provide empirical depth, illuminating the intricate interactions orchestrated by China's efforts and their consequences. This contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary influence strategies, their implications for bilateral relations, and the crucial role domestic actors play in mediating the outcomes of international engagement.

Theoretical framework

Public diplomacy (PD), in its broadest sense, encompasses activities beyond traditional state-to-state diplomacy, designed to inform, influence, and engage foreign publics in support of foreign policy objectives. It involves interactions not only between governments and foreign populations but also among non-state actors.⁹ Key components often include *listening* (understanding foreign perspectives), *advocacy* (promoting policies and ideas), *cultural diplomacy* (sharing arts, values, and ideas), and *exchanges* (facilitating people-to-people connections). A distinction is often made between advocacy, which tends to be shorter-term and focused on specific policy goals, and relationship building, which emphasizes long-term mutual understanding and trust, often through cultural and educational exchanges.

Closely intertwined with PD is the concept of *soft power*, famously articulated by Joseph Nye as the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, arising from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies. Public diplomacy is often viewed as the primary means states attempt to cultivate and deploy their soft power resources. China's global outreach efforts, including large-scale initiatives like the BRI, can be interpreted as attempts to bolster its soft power and present an attractive alternative development and international cooperation model. However, the extent to which massive infrastructure projects constitute 'soft' power remains debatable.

The intersection of public diplomacy and international development cooperation forms the basis of *development-driven diplomacy*. This approach recognizes that aid, technical

assistance, and development projects can serve developmental objectives and significant foreign policy and public diplomacy functions. Pamment (2015) argues for recognizing the convergence of PD and international development, suggesting they emerged from shared contexts and have evolved in parallel. This convergence manifests in two ways relevant to this study: development activities act as communication *for* development (e.g., building a school or providing training conveys a message), and the strategic communication *about* these activities serves reputational goals (e.g., branding aid programs). China's BRI projects in Indonesia fit squarely within this framework; the tangible infrastructure and economic activities, as well as the narratives constructed around them, function as instruments of public diplomacy to engage Indonesian stakeholders and shape perceptions.

Development-driven diplomacy inherently necessitates multi-stakeholder engagement. The ABGCM model (Sudiana et al., 2020) provides a critical lens to China's public diplomacy efforts targeting Academia to transfer knowledge, Business to secure economic alignment, Government to enable policy support, Community to build grassroots legitimacy, and Media to shape narratives. However, power asymmetries may distort this synergy. Thus, while Pamment (2015) frames development as PD, the ABGCM framework reveals its effectiveness hinges on equitable stakeholder engagement.

Literature review

Existing scholarship provides essential context for analyzing China's development-driven public diplomacy in Indonesia. Research on China's public diplomacy strategies highlights an evolution towards more sophisticated methods aimed at "telling China's story well" (讲好中国故事). This involves deploying a range of tools, including cultural institutions like Confucius Institutes (Hoon & Yeremia, 2024), expanding educational exchange programs (Ma, 2024), increasing global media presence, and leveraging large-scale initiatives like the BRI to project an image of a responsible, cooperative global power, often seeking to counter prevailing "China threat" narratives. The narrative campaign seeks to legitimize China's authoritarian development model and deflect Western critiques (Hoon & Yeremia, 2024). In Indonesia, however, this top-down storytelling often clashes with the on-ground realities of BRI projects, creating a 'perception gap' (Yuniarto, 2019) where state-led propaganda conflicts with community experiences.

The literature on China-Indonesia relations underscores a complex history transitioning from closeness to hostility and back to a pragmatic, economically driven partnership (Zulkarnain & Indrayani, 2022). Since normalization in 1990, economic interdependence has deepened dramatically, with China becoming Indonesia's largest trading partner and a primary source of foreign investment (Celios, 2024). A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was established, signifying high-level political commitment (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2025). However, complexities persist, including historical mistrust related to the Cold War era and treatment of the ethnic Chinese minority (Zulkarnain & Indrayani, 2022), sensitivities surrounding the South China Sea (though Indonesia is not a claimant, disputes affect regional stability), and the influence of domestic Indonesian politics, such as the role of Islamist groups in shaping public discourse on China. Concerns about economic dependency on China and the potential negative consequences of large-scale Chinese investment are recurrent themes in Indonesian public and elite discourse (Celios, 2024).⁴

Studies examining the impacts of the BRI in Indonesia reveal a mixed picture. China's

motivations are economic (e.g., utilizing excess industrial capacity, securing resources and markets, facilitating trade) and geopolitical (e.g., enhancing regional influence, securing strategic connectivity, promoting its development model, consolidating global power status) (Antika et al., 2025). For Indonesia, the BRI offers significant opportunities for infrastructure development, aligning with national priorities and attracting needed investment.³ However, concerns are frequently raised regarding potential debt traps, environmental degradation, social disruptions associated with large projects, the influx of foreign labor, and Indonesian provinces' overall readiness and capacity to manage BRI projects effectively (Antika et al., 2025).

Finally, understanding the domestic context requires considering frameworks for multi-stakeholder engagement. The Penta Helix model, conceptualizing collaboration between Academia, Business, Government, Community, and Media (ABGCM), provides a valuable analytical tool (Sudiana et al., 2020). Originating in innovation studies, it posits that synergy among these five pillars drives development. Academia contributes knowledge and human capital; Business provides investment and entrepreneurial drive; Government sets policy frameworks and infrastructure; Community offers social capital, local knowledge, and participation; and Media facilitates information flow and public discourse (Sudiana et al., 2020). This model aligns with broader concepts of multi-stakeholder engagement, increasingly recognized as crucial in international relations and sustainable development, emphasizing the need to involve diverse actors beyond the state in addressing complex challenges (OECD, 2024).

Method

Based on these theoretical and empirical foundations, this paper employs an analytical framework that views China's development-driven public diplomacy in Indonesia as a strategic endeavor to engage key components of the Indonesian ABGCM ecosystem. This engagement occurs primarily through the platform of tangible development benefits, particularly those delivered via BRI projects. The framework posits that China utilizes these projects not just for their economic utility but as deliberate instruments to (1) create venues for direct interaction between Chinese actors (state, corporate, educational) and Indonesian counterparts across the ABGCM spectrum; (2) facilitate knowledge and technology transfer (real or perceived); (3) showcase Chinese capabilities, efficiency, and goodwill; (4) cultivate positive sentiment and build long-term relationships with influential groups within Indonesian society.

The analysis focuses on specific collaborations (the case studies) as micro-level examples of this strategy in action. It examines how these collaborations are designed to interact with different ABGCM pillars, their intended public diplomacy functions, and their perceived impacts on Indonesian stakeholders' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors within the ABGCM context.

A critical perspective is necessary when applying this framework. While official Chinese rhetoric emphasizes "win-win cooperation" and mutual benefit, and the ABGCM model implies synergistic partnership (Sudiana et al., 2020), the significant power asymmetry inherent in the China-Indonesia relationship cannot be ignored (Celios, 2024). Persistent concerns within Indonesia regarding Chinese dominance and potential negative consequences of deep engagement suggest that China's interaction with the ABGCM ecosystem might be less about fostering genuine, equitable partnerships and more about strategically influencing or co-opting key actors. This could involve aligning powerful business interests, shaping government policy decisions, influencing academic discourse, managing community responses, and attempting to guide media narratives to

facilitate China's economic and strategic objectives under the appealing banner of development cooperation. Therefore, the analysis must scrutinize whether these collaborative initiatives represent truly mutualistic endeavors benefiting all stakeholders across the ABGCM spectrum or reflect a more instrumental approach where specific pillars (perhaps Government and Business) are prioritized and cultivated, potentially at the expense of others (like Community or environmental well-being), thereby shaping the overall public diplomacy outcome.

Result and Discussion

Engaging the ABGCM Ecosystem in China-Indonesia Context

China's public diplomacy in Indonesia increasingly operates through the machinery of development cooperation, strategically linking large-scale economic initiatives, particularly under the BRI, to broader diplomatic objectives (China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025b). The official narrative consistently emphasizes shared development aspirations, mutual benefits, high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, and the overarching goal of building a China-Indonesia "community with a shared future" (China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025a). Infrastructure projects, industrial investments, and skills development programs serve as tangible focal points for this engagement, providing concrete platforms for interaction across various sectors of Indonesian society and grounding abstract diplomatic language in visible, material outcomes.

Executing this strategy requires navigating a complex and often ambivalent Indonesian perceptual landscape. Recent surveys suggest a generally positive disposition towards China at a macro level. A 2022 CEIAS survey found over 80% of Indonesian respondents held positive feelings towards China, among the highest rates in the Indo-Pacific (CEIAS, 2022). Similarly, a 2024 CELIOS survey reported 79% viewing the relationship as strong ("very close" or "fairly close"). A 2024 BRIN survey indicated Indonesian government elites perceive China as a highly relevant and economically beneficial partner (BRIN, 2024). This positive sentiment is often linked to China's perceived economic dynamism and its role as Indonesia's top trading partner and a major investor (Celios, 2025).

However, this surface-level positivity coexists with significant underlying skepticism and specific anxieties. The 2017 ISEAS survey, while finding majority admiration for China (76.7%), noted it ranked lowest among eight surveyed countries and revealed skepticism about the positive impact of China's rise (only 41% positive) (ISEAS, 2017). Concerns about economic over-dependence are frequently voiced (Celios, 2024), with many believing Indonesia gains only limited benefits from close economic ties (ISEAS, 2017). The influx of Chinese workers has been a point of public scrutiny and misinformation. Regarding the BRI specifically, awareness among the Indonesian public appears limited (42% unfamiliar) (Celios, 2024), and where awareness exists, concerns about foreign dominance, debt burdens, and environmental impacts surface. Qualitative studies also point to a persistent "perception gap" rooted in differing values, historical legacies, and worries about sovereignty and China's long-term strategic intentions (Yuniarto, 2019). This duality is captured in Table 1, which synthesizes findings from various public opinion surveys conducted between 2017 and 2024.

Table 1: Synthesis of Indonesian Public Opinion on China and BRI (2017-2024)

Survey Year/Source	Overall Favorability / Closeness	Perceived Economic Importance/	Support for Alignment/	Awareness/ View of BRI	Key Concerns Mentioned
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		Benefit	Neutrality		
2017 ISEAS	76.7% Admire China	90.1% Believe Ties Benefit Indonesia (but 62.4% see 'little benefit')	N/A	N/A	Impact of China's rise (39% negative), Chinese workers, and Chinese investment conditions
2022 CEIAS	>80% Positive feelings	84% View China as economically important	Divided equally US vs. China	N/A	(Implied: Concerns exist despite positive views)
2024 CELIOS	79% View relationship as strong	(Implied high via investment data)	78% Support neutrality	42% Unfamiliar; 41% Recognize infra. role; 17% Worry	Economic dependency, Political influence, Foreign dominance (BRI), Environment (BRI)
2024 BRIN (Govt Elites)	Relations "very close"	Most profitable partner	N/A	(Implied positive via partnership)	(Implied: Managing influence)
Qualitative Studies	Mixed Perception / Gap	Economic benefits acknowledged	N/A	Mixed; Concerns present	Sovereignty, Dependency, Cultural gaps, Labor, Environment, Geopolitics

Note: Data points are drawn from cited sources. N/A indicates data not available or not directly comparable in the source.

The coexistence of widespread positive sentiment with deep-seated anxieties presents a significant challenge for China's public diplomacy. It suggests that while many Indonesians may appreciate the tangible economic benefits associated with Chinese trade and investment, this appreciation does not necessarily translate into uncritical acceptance of China's growing influence or the specific terms of engagement. Public opinion appears somewhat compartmentalized, distinguishing between the general appeal of China's economic success and specific concerns about the bilateral relationship's implications for Indonesia's economy, society, and sovereignty. China's development-driven approach, by its very nature, may amplify this tension. It delivers visible economic activity and infrastructure, potentially bolstering positive macro perceptions. It simultaneously creates concrete friction points—land disputes, environmental damage, labor issues—fuel micro-level concerns and skepticism. Therefore, the task for China's PD extends beyond simply promoting benefits; it involves actively managing the anxieties and mitigating the negative consequences of its development footprint. Failure to do so risks undermining the very goodwill it seeks to cultivate.

Mechanisms in Action: Case Studies of China-Indonesia Collaboration

This section examines three distinct cases—a skills development initiative (Luban Workshops), a flagship infrastructure project (Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail), and a major industrial investment (Morowali Industrial Park)—to understand how China's development-driven public diplomacy operates on the ground and interacts with Indonesia's ABGCM ecosystem.

Case Study 1. Industry-Education Integration: Luban Workshops and Skills Development

The Luban Workshop initiative, named after a revered ancient Chinese craftsman, represents a distinct strand of China's educational outreach under the BRI (Huang, 2025). Launched globally, these workshops aim to export Chinese models of vocational education and technical training, often tailored to meet the needs of Chinese industries operating abroad.²⁰ They are platforms for sharing specific technical skills, teaching methodologies, and Chinese standards, combining academic education with practical vocational training.²⁰ Indonesia hosts Luban Workshops, with documented examples including one established as early as 2017 (Huang, 2024) and a more recent "Intelligent Manufacturing Center" inaugurated in February 2024 at Muhammadiyah University of Jakarta, a collaboration with China's Yangzhou Polytechnic Institute (Xinhua, 2025).

Luban Workshops demonstrate a targeted engagement across multiple ABGCM pillars. The Academia pillar is central, involving direct partnerships between Chinese vocational colleges and Indonesian universities (Xinhua, 2025). This includes sharing curricula, developing joint training programs, training local instructors (chinadaily.cn, 2024), and establishing dedicated physical centers or labs within Indonesian institutions (Xinhua, 2025). The Business pillar is intrinsically linked, as the workshops are designed to cultivate a workforce with skills relevant to Chinese technology and investments in Indonesia (chinadaily.cn, 2024). Collaborations with specific Chinese enterprises, such as Jiangsu Shuanghui Electric Power Development Co., Ltd. in the Jakarta case ²², or potentially larger firms like Huawei or Haier mentioned in broader reports ²¹, underscore this industry-education integration. Government support is implicit, with the initiative framed within the broader context of China-Indonesia bilateral cooperation under the BRI and aligning with Indonesian government objectives for enhancing workforce skills (Xinhua, 2025). The Community pillar is engaged through the direct beneficiaries: Indonesian students and youth who receive training, acquire technical skills, learn Mandarin, and gain potential employment opportunities (Huang, 2024). Finally, the Media pillar, particularly state-affiliated outlets from China, often features favorable coverage highlighting the workshops' success, cooperative spirit, and contribution to local development (chinadaily.cn, 2024).

From a PD perspective, Luban Workshops serve multiple functions. They showcase Chinese technological standards and educational models, projecting an image of advancement and competence (chinadaily.cn, 2024). They aim to generate goodwill among Indonesian youth and educational institutions by providing tangible skills and pathways to employment (Huang, 2024). They facilitate the transfer of specific, industry-relevant knowledge, potentially fostering dependence on Chinese technology and standards (chinadaily.cn, 2024). Furthermore, they build long-term relationships with Indonesian academic partners and cultivate a pool of Indonesian talent familiar with and potentially favorable towards Chinese enterprises and work culture. These workshops embody the "people-to-people bond" narrative often emphasized in BRI rhetoric (ISEAS, 2024), providing a concrete example of practical cooperation that directly benefits individuals.

Reports indicate that Luban Workshops have trained significant numbers of Indonesian students, over 300 professionals from the Muhammadiyah University program alone (Xinhua, 2025) and potentially thousands across different initiatives (chinadaily.cn, 2024). Graduates may work in Chinese-invested companies or related sectors (Huang, 2024). The initiative generally receives positive framing in official media narratives

(chinadaily.cn, 2024). This integrated approach, directly linking Academia, Business, and Community under a Government-endorsed framework, appears to be a relatively low-controversy, high-impact form of PD within its target groups. It operationalizes the "development" aspect through human capital investment, creating direct beneficiaries and aligning with Indonesia's national interest in skills enhancement. It makes it potentially more resilient to criticism than large, capital-intensive projects. However, the long-term PD success hinges on whether the skills imparted lead to sustainable, empowering careers for Indonesians or primarily serve to supply labor for Chinese corporate interests, potentially reinforcing existing economic dependencies. This suggests a growing sophistication in China's PD toolkit, moving towards targeted interventions that leverage the interconnectedness of the ABGCM ecosystem for specific outcomes.

Case Study 2. Flagship Infrastructure: The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail (HSR)

The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail (HSR) project is one of Indonesia's most visible and politically significant BRI projects.² Spanning approximately 142-150 kilometers, it connects the national capital, Jakarta, with Bandung, the capital of West Java (China AidData, 2021). The project was awarded to China following a competitive bidding process against Japan. China initially offered financing terms that did not require an Indonesian government guarantee or state budget allocation (China AidData, 2021). Construction was undertaken by PT Kereta Cepat Indonesia China (KCIC), a joint venture consortium established in 2015, comprising Indonesian state-owned enterprises (SOEs) led by PT Wijaya Karya, and Chinese SOEs including China Railway International and China Railway Construction Corp (CRCC).

The HSR project involved intensive engagement across the ABGCM spectrum. Government involvement was paramount, with high-level political backing from Indonesian and Chinese presidents and coordination through relevant ministries. Indonesian regulatory bodies were deeply involved in issuing permits, including the crucial and later controversial environmental impact assessment (AMDAL) (China AidData, 2021). Critically, despite initial promises, the Indonesian government ultimately had to authorize state funding and provide a financial bailout to cover significant cost overruns, indicating deep political commitment intertwined with project difficulties (China AidData, 2021). The state auditor (BPKP) also verified the extent of these overruns (China AidData, 2021). The Business pillar was dominated by the SOEs forming the KCIC joint venture, with China Development Bank (CDB) acting as the primary financier through substantial loans (China AidData, 2021). The Community pillar experienced multifaceted impacts. On the one hand, the project promised significant job creation during construction and benefits for future passengers through drastically reduced travel times. On the other hand, communities along the route faced significant disruption, including land acquisition disputes and lawsuits (China AidData, 2021), property damage caused by construction activities like blasting, and severe flooding attributed to poor construction management and inadequate drainage (China AidData, 2021). The Media provided extensive coverage, from celebratory reports on construction milestones and the operational launch (China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025a) to critical investigations into the project's delays, escalating costs, environmental violations, and social consequences (China AidData, 2021). Media framing likely varied depending on the outlet's orientation and sources (Masduki et al., 2023).

The HSR was intended to serve several key PD functions for China. It was designed as a powerful symbol of China's advanced technological capabilities in high-speed rail and its

capacity to deliver complex infrastructure projects abroad. It was meant to embody the success of the BRI and the strength of the China-Indonesia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. By contributing to Indonesia's infrastructure modernization goals, particularly aligning with President Joko Widodo's connectivity agenda (Yuniarto, 2019), it aimed to generate goodwill and demonstrate China's role as a key development partner. The project was expected to generate positive narratives centered on speed, progress, and enhanced connectivity.

The railway was eventually completed and commenced operations in late 2023, albeit significantly behind the original 2019 schedule (China AidData, 2021). However, its implementation was plagued by major challenges that substantially complicated its PD impact. Severe cost overruns, estimated at around \$1.5 billion by the Indonesian state auditor (China AidData, 2021), necessitated an Indonesian government bailout, contradicting initial financing assurances and raising concerns about financial viability and burden-sharing (China AidData, 2021). Numerous environmental issues were documented, including criticisms of a rushed and flawed EIA (AMDAL) process, lack of public participation, and construction practices leading to recurrent flooding and environmental degradation (China AidData, 2021). Social impacts included unresolved land acquisition compensation claims and damage to local residences. Public and media perceptions remained mixed, reflecting national pride in technological achievement and significant controversy surrounding its cost and consequences. The project's high visibility, intended as a PD asset, meant its failures and controversies also received widespread attention, potentially tarnishing rather than enhancing China's image. The HSR case illustrates the high-stakes nature of using flagship infrastructure for public diplomacy; implementation failures, cost escalations, and unmitigated negative local impacts can easily overshadow the intended positive messaging, demonstrating how development-driven PD can backfire if not managed with transparency, accountability, and genuine attention to local concerns.

Case Study 3. Industrial Investment: The Morowali Nickel Industrial Park (IMIP)

The Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park (IMIP) in Central Sulawesi represents a colossal investment in Indonesia's resource sector, transforming the region into one of Southeast Asia's largest nickel processing centers (Nindita & Feng, 2025). Established in 2013 through a collaboration between Indonesian mining conglomerates and China's Tsingshan Holding Group, IMIP received high-level political endorsement from both countries and was subsequently integrated as a key BRI project (Nindita & Feng, 2025). The park spans thousands of hectares, hosts dozens of companies (predominantly Chinese-invested), employs tens of thousands of workers, and features extensive infrastructure, including smelters, power plants, a port, and an airport. China's investment dominates Indonesia's nickel industry, controlling most mines and smelters (Nindita & Feng, 2025).

IMIP's development showcases intense engagement, particularly with the Business and Government pillars. It is fundamentally driven by large corporations, with Chinese giants like Tsingshan, Huayue Nickel Cobalt (HYNC), and Delong Group partnering with Indonesian firms (Nindita & Feng, 2025). The primary business activity is extracting and processing nickel ore into higher-value products like Nickel Pig Iron (NPI) and materials for electric vehicle (EV) batteries, primarily destined for export, especially to China (Nindita & Feng, 2025). Government support has been crucial, as evidenced by the initial high-level agreement signing (Nindita & Feng, 2025) and the project's alignment with Indonesia's national policy of resource downstreaming to capture more value

domestically (Pradana et al., 2024). Government agencies are involved in regulatory oversight, such as environmental permits and assessments (e.g., the Ministry of Environment and Forestry's PROPER ratings) (NIC, 2022). However, the effectiveness of this oversight has been questioned (Jong, 2025). The Community pillar experiences profound and deeply contradictory impacts. On one side, IMIP has generated massive local employment, estimated at around 80,000 jobs by early 2024, significantly boosting the local economy (Nindita & Feng, 2025). However, this comes at a steep cost for many residents. Widespread environmental pollution (air, water, land) is reported, leading to health problems like respiratory infections and skin diseases. Deforestation and damage to marine ecosystems have destroyed traditional livelihoods, particularly fishing (Nindita & Feng, 2025). Serious labor issues persist, including poor workplace safety leading to numerous accidents and fatalities (Jong, 2025), disputes over wages and long working hours (tuk.or.id, 2025), precarious employment contracts (Nindita & Feng, 2025), and documented ethnic tensions between Indonesian and Chinese workers (chinalaborwatch.org, 2025). Communities have protested and sought NGOs' support (Jong, 2025). While some corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives exist, such as donations and the Morowali Metal Industry Polytechnic establishment by IMIP to train local workers (Pradana et al., 2024), their impact relative to the negative externalities is debatable. The Academia linkage appears mainly through this dedicated polytechnic (Pradana et al., 2024). The Media and NGOs have played an increasingly critical role, documenting and publicizing the nickel boom's severe environmental and social costs in Morowali (Nindita & Feng, 2025). This critical narrative is counterbalanced by corporate communications, including ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) reports published by companies like HYNC (and Nickel Industries Ltd (NIC, 2022), emphasizing positive contributions, mitigation efforts, and compliance with regulations.

From China's perspective, IMIP serves several potential PD functions. It showcases China's massive investment capacity and role in driving Indonesia's industrialization and economic growth, particularly in the strategic EV battery supply chain (Pradana et al., 2024). Creating tens of thousands of jobs is a powerful narrative of economic contribution (Pradana et al., 2024). It demonstrates technology transfer (e.g., smelting and High-Pressure Acid Leaching - HPAL processes), although the environmental impacts of these technologies are highly controversial. The sheer scale of investment might also foster local and potentially national economic dependency, which could translate into political leverage or goodwill in certain government and business circles.

The economic impact in the Morowali region has been transformative, with significant growth and job creation (Pradana et al., 2024). However, this has been accompanied by severe and widely documented environmental degradation (Nindita & Feng, 2025) and critical social problems. Labor conditions are frequently described as poor and dangerous, leading to protests, strikes, and fatalities (Jong, 2025). The social fabric of local communities has been disrupted, with traditional livelihoods lost and health negatively affected (Nindita & Feng, 2025). IMIP has become a focal point for criticism from local communities, labor unions, environmental activists, and domestic and international media/NGOs (Nindita & Feng, 2025). While companies issue ESG reports detailing their sustainability and community engagement efforts (Huayue, 2021), these often starkly contrast with independent reports of ongoing problems. This stark disconnect between the narrative of economic development and the lived reality of environmental damage and social harm suggests a major failure in public diplomacy. The case of IMIP highlights how development-driven PD focused heavily on resource extraction and industrial output, without adequate environmental safeguards and respect for labor rights and community well-being, can severely damage the investing country's image and relationships at the grassroots level, potentially negating any

goodwill generated by economic contributions. Corporate ESG initiatives may be perceived as insufficient or merely performative when confronted with persistent, tangible negative impacts, underscoring an inherent tension in using resource-intensive industries as primary tools for building positive international relationships.

Development, Diplomacy, and Domestic Dynamics

Synthesizing the findings from the three case studies reveals important patterns and contradictions in China's development-driven public diplomacy strategy in Indonesia as it interacts with the ABGCM ecosystem.

Cross-Case Synthesis

The cases demonstrate distinct patterns of ABGCM engagement and varying public diplomacy outcomes:

Luban Workshops represent a focused, relatively low-cost, and seemingly low-controversy approach. Engagement is strongest with academia and business, which directly involve government support and benefit a specific segment of the community (students). Media coverage appears largely positive, driven by official sources. The PD impact seems positive within these targeted groups, focusing on human capital development and practical cooperation.

The Jakarta-Bandung HSR exemplifies a high-visibility, high-cost, government-business-dominated flagship project. Community engagement was significant but largely negative due to disruptions and inadequate mitigation. Media coverage was extensive and mixed, reflecting the project's prestige and numerous problems. This represents a high-risk, high-reward PD strategy where implementation failures severely undermined the intended positive messaging.

IMIP showcases a massive business-government-driven industrial investment. It delivers substantial economic impact (jobs, regional growth) but generates severe negative consequences for the Community (environment, health, labor conditions). This attracts critical attention from the Media and NGOs, creating a major legitimacy crisis despite the economic benefits. The Academia link (polytechnic) appears secondary to the industrial operations. Despite strong G-B alignment, the overall PD impact seems highly contested and potentially harmful at the grassroots and international levels.

Assessing Effectiveness

Evaluating the effectiveness of these collaborations in achieving China's presumed goals—shaping perceptions, fostering ties, advancing strategic interests—yields a complex and qualified assessment.

Shaping Perceptions. China's development-driven approach appears insufficient to guarantee positive perceptions across the board. While macro-level surveys show generally favorable views of China in Indonesia, these coexist with significant anxieties.⁴ Specific projects like the HSR and IMIP have demonstrably generated negative perceptions among directly affected communities and critical observers due to implementation failures, environmental damage, and social costs. The perception gap between official narratives of "win-win" cooperation and the lived experiences of some Indonesian stakeholders persists. Tangible development benefits do not automatically translate into positive sentiment if the associated costs are perceived as too high or

unfairly distributed.

Fostering Ties. Bilateral ties appear strengthened primarily at the Government-to-Government (G-G) and Business-to-Business (B-B) levels, facilitated by joint ventures, high-level dialogues, and shared economic interests. Programs like Luban Workshops selectively foster Academic ties (A-A). However, relationships with significant Community (C) segments can be severely strained or damaged by the negative impacts of large projects. The quality and depth of bilateral ties thus vary considerably across different pillars of the ABGCM framework.

Advancing Goals. China appears successful in advancing specific economic goals, such as securing access to vital resources like nickel, creating markets for its technology (HSR) and educational models (Luban), and establishing infrastructure connectivity. Geopolitical goals, such as increasing influence within Indonesia and the region, may be advanced at the elite political and economic levels. However, this influence might be brittle if broader societal acceptance does not underpin it. Adverse grassroots reactions and critical international media coverage can undermine China's efforts to project itself as a benign and responsible partner, potentially hindering its long-term public diplomacy objectives of building trust and mutual understanding.

The Role of Indonesian Stakeholders (ABGCM)

Crucially, Indonesian actors within the ABGCM framework are not passive recipients of Chinese initiatives but actively shape the outcomes. The Government (G) often plays an enabling role, facilitating large projects aligned with national development plans (e.g., infrastructure, resource downstreaming) (Yuniarto, 2019). However, it also faces domestic pressure to manage negative consequences, leading to interventions like the HSR bailout or demands for environmental assessments (China AidData, 2021). Business (B) partners, both SOEs and private conglomerates, engage actively, often reaping significant economic benefits, but they also face reputational risks associated with controversial projects. Academia (A) participates in specific collaborative programs like Luban Workshops (Xinhua, 2024). However, appears less central in the larger infrastructure and industrial projects examined here. The Community (C) is the site of direct impact, experiencing both job opportunities and severe negative externalities. Community responses range from acceptance to organized protest and engagement with advocacy groups, significantly influencing project dynamics and public perception (Jong, 2025). The Media (M) and NGOs play a vital role in framing narratives, amplifying community concerns, scrutinizing project implementation, and holding corporations and governments accountable. Indonesian media outlets shape public understanding of BRI projects, employing different framing strategies depending on their audience and editorial stance (Masduki et al., 2023). Bridging the perception gap requires adjustments from China and proactive engagement and dialogue among Indonesian stakeholders, fostering greater mutual understanding between different societal groups regarding the costs and benefits of deep engagement with China (Yuniarto, 2019).

Challenges and Contradictions

China's development-driven public diplomacy in Indonesia is fraught with inherent tensions and contradictions, which are revealed clearly through the ABGCM lens. Pursuing tangible economic benefits and infrastructure development frequently clashes with environmental sustainability and social equity concerns, particularly in the IMIP case. Actions designed to benefit the business and government pillars (e.g., rapid resource exploitation and flagship project completion) often impose significant costs on

the community pillar, generating negative feedback loops through media and NGO activism. This creates a fundamental contradiction: the very development projects intended to build goodwill and showcase China's positive contributions can simultaneously become sources of resentment, mistrust, and negative publicity, thereby undermining the overarching public diplomacy goals.

The official narrative of "win-win" cooperation (Chen & Lee, 2025) is often challenged by unequal power dynamics and unevenly distributed impacts, fueling concerns about dependency and sovereignty (Yuniarto, 2019). The emphasis on state-led and corporate-driven projects (G-B) can marginalize community voices (C) and bypass robust participatory processes, further exacerbating local grievances. While China attempts multi-stakeholder engagement, its strategy appears to struggle with managing the inherent trade-offs and conflicts between the interests of different ABGCM pillars. Prioritizing economic output and elite alignment often leads to neglecting or downplaying local communities' social and environmental costs, resulting in fragmented and often counterproductive public diplomacy outcomes. A truly effective multi-stakeholder PD strategy would require not just parallel engagement with different actors but an integrated approach that actively anticipates and mitigates potential conflicts between their interests, fostering genuine dialogue and shared value creation across the entire ecosystem. China's current model in Indonesia appears to fall short of this ideal, highlighting the complexities and pitfalls of relying heavily on tangible development projects as primary instruments for building broad-based international relationships.

Conclusion

This paper has examined China's contemporary public diplomacy strategy in Indonesia, characterized by a "development-driven" approach that leverages tangible economic initiatives, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative, to engage multiple sectors of Indonesian society. Analyzing this strategy through the lens of the Academia, Business, Government, Community, and Media (ABGCM) framework and focusing on three distinct case studies—Luban Workshops, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail, and the Morowali Industrial Park—reveals a complex picture of mixed effectiveness and inherent contradictions.

The central research question asked how specific China-Indonesia collaborations across the ABGCM pillars shape perceptions, foster ties, and advance China's goals. The findings indicate that China strategically uses development projects as platforms for interaction, knowledge transfer, showcasing capabilities, and attempting to cultivate goodwill. Luban Workshops demonstrate a targeted approach, effectively engaging Academia, Business, and Community actors in skills development, yielding positive outcomes within specific groups. The HSR project, a high-profile Government-Business venture, aimed for symbolic impact but was marred by implementation failures, cost overruns, and negative community impacts, resulting in a highly contested public diplomacy outcome. IMIP, driven by Business and Government interests, delivers significant economic growth but at the cost of severe environmental degradation and social disruption, generating substantial negative feedback from Community and Media/NGO actors.

Overall, China's development-driven PD in Indonesia strengthens elite ties (G-G, B-B) and advances specific economic interests. However, it struggles to translate these into broad-based positive perceptions or deep mutual trust across Indonesian society. The tangible benefits of development are often overshadowed by the negative externalities of project implementation, leading to persistent skepticism, perception gaps, and localized

resentment. The strategy's effectiveness is highly uneven across the ABGCM spectrum, often prioritizing G and B engagement at the expense of C, and failing to manage the resulting contradictions adequately.

This study contributes to public diplomacy scholarship in several ways. It empirically demonstrates the mechanisms and complexities of development-driven diplomacy, highlighting how tangible projects function as PD platforms and generate significant risks and unintended consequences. It underscores the limitations of using material benefits alone to cultivate soft power or positive perceptions, especially when projects entail high social and environmental costs. The Indonesian case suggests that the effectiveness of development-driven PD is contingent upon responsible implementation, transparency, and genuine engagement with local concerns. Furthermore, applying the ABGCM framework offers a valuable analytical tool for moving beyond state-centric PD analysis. It reveals how foreign actors engage with diverse domestic stakeholders and how the interactions and conflicts within this ecosystem shape diplomatic outcomes. It highlights the importance of understanding the internal dynamics and potential contradictions within a multi-stakeholder engagement strategy.

The findings offer pertinent insights for policymakers. For China, achieving its public diplomacy goals in Indonesia requires more than delivering development projects. It necessitates a fundamental shift towards more responsible and sustainable implementation practices, incorporating robust environmental and social safeguards, ensuring greater transparency, and genuinely addressing the concerns of local communities (C). Managing the inherent contradictions within its multi-stakeholder approach—balancing economic objectives with social and environmental legitimacy—is crucial for building long-term trust. For Indonesia, the analysis underscores the need for robust domestic governance frameworks to maximize the benefits of BRI cooperation while mitigating the associated risks. This includes strengthening environmental regulations, enforcing labor laws, ensuring meaningful community participation in project planning and oversight, and fostering a balanced and informed public discourse (M) on the multifaceted nature of the relationship with China. Promoting genuine people-to-people exchange, as suggested by Yuniarto, remains vital for bridging cultural and perception gaps beyond large-scale projects.

This study is subject to limitations, primarily its reliance on publicly available secondary data and reports. While efforts were made to synthesize diverse sources, the lack of extensive primary qualitative data, such as in-depth interviews with a wide range of Indonesian stakeholders across the ABGCM spectrum (as envisioned in the initial methodology), restricts the depth of perceptual analysis. Future research could address this through focused qualitative fieldwork within specific project locations. Comparative studies examining China's development-driven PD across different BRI partner countries could reveal variations based on local context. Longitudinal research tracking the evolution of Indonesian perceptions over time would provide valuable insights into the long-term impacts of these collaborations. Finally, more sophisticated analyses of media framing dynamics (M pillar), potentially using computational methods, could further illuminate how narratives about China and the BRI are constructed and contested within the Indonesian public sphere.

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