



Assessing the China Threat: Perspectives of University Students in Jakarta on the South China Sea Dispute and the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

Discussions on the ‘China threat theory’ in Southeast Asia have been reignited by China’s assertive manoeuvres in the South China Sea and its expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While substantial research has investigated the views of political elites and policymakers, the perceptions of educated urban youth, particularly regarding China’s geopolitical and economic strategies, remain underexplored. This study centers on Indonesia, Southeast Asia’s most populous nation, to gauge the sentiments of urban youth towards China’s rising influence. Through a survey of 403 university students in Jakarta and its vicinity, we reveal an intensifying negative stance among these young, educated Indonesians corresponding with China’s increased assertiveness and economic pursuits under the BRI. This article underscores the nuanced perspectives of Indonesia’s future leaders, offering a targeted analysis of the attitudes of educated youth in an urban setting towards evolving Sino-Indonesian relations.

Keywords China threat · Belt and road initiative · Perception · South China sea · China’s assertiveness · Indonesia · Economic dominance

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1 Introduction

Alongside its rapid economic growth, China is increasingly active in pursuing its global role of becoming a great power (Buzan 2010; Xuetong 2006). However, China's efforts to improve its status coincide with a growing assertiveness in foreign policy. This has revived the global debate about the threat of a rising China to the liberal world order, known as the 'China threat narrative' (Jeffery 2009; Pan 2004).

In a nutshell, the China threat theory stipulates that the rise of China, and particularly its economy, will create regional and global instability. This is due to the assumption that China, as a revisionist state, is trying to change the existing global order in order to fulfil its national interests (Huiyun 2009). At the global level, due to its authoritarian nature, many believe that a stronger China will actively delegitimize liberal values as the basis of the global world order (Yang and Liu 2012). Meanwhile, in the regional context, the rise of China's economy will lead to the country becoming a hegemonic power dominating the Asian region (Karim and Nabila 2022), intensifying territorial conflicts and instability due to ongoing unresolved border issues between China and several countries in Southeast Asia (Fravel 2005; Liff and Ikenberry 2014).

The China threat theory has, therefore, been widely regarded as fact among the foreign policy decisionmakers given the increasingly visible Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and the expansion of Chinese investment in Southeast Asia through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Fitriani 2018; Herlijanto 2022; Singh et al. 2017; Yerima 2022). This article investigates the extent to which the public of Indonesia, Southeast Asia's largest country, perceives China as a threat.

This article zeroes in on university students in Jakarta, Indonesia's capital, as a representative sample to probe into Indonesian public perceptions of China. Under President Joko Widodo (2014–2024), the Indonesian government has significantly focused on infrastructure development, aligning itself with the BRI. This burgeoning alliance has drawn political scrutiny within Indonesia, with economic ties with China becoming a hotbed of debate among domestic political factions. Particularly, the government's perceived ambivalence in confronting China's assertive South China Sea policies—attributed to Indonesia's economic ties with China—has fueled opposition criticism.

Exploring the perspectives of Indonesian university students, especially those in the nation's capital, is pivotal. These students are not only future leaders but also part of a demographic that is increasingly highly educated and urban, seen by many as the harbingers of social and cultural change. With substantial access to information and an inherent capacity for critical analysis, they offer nuanced views on Sino-Indonesian relations. Moreover, their understanding is further colored by Indonesia's unique historical and cultural ties with China, which can profoundly shape perceptions. Thus, the insights garnered from this cohort are invaluable for appreciating the complex interplay of cultural, historical, and political dynamics that inform contemporary Indonesian attitudes towards China.

Using a novel data survey conducted among Jakarta's university students ($n=403$), this study reveals a predominantly negative and hardening stance among these students towards China, paralleling concerns over China's assertive actions in

the South China Sea and its ambitious economic agenda, as manifested in the BRI. Economically, there is a notable anxiety regarding the influx of Chinese workers into Indonesia, which the students perceive as a threat to local employment. This sentiment is strongly linked to students' unfavorable opinions of China. From a security standpoint, students believe that China's aggressive policies in the South China Sea are problematic, and they view Indonesia's economic ties with China as a constraint on the Indonesian government's capacity to respond firmly. Politically, students feel that domestic policy and political polarization in Indonesia influence perceptions of China. The study notes a correlation between support for the 2019 presidential election winners (President Widodo and Vice President Ma'ruf Amin) and a more favorable view of the BRI, suggesting that political allegiances impact students' views on China's initiatives. The research underscores that, among these university students, there is a discernible correlation between domestic political divides and perceptions of China as ideological and geopolitical concerns.

Our research undertakes an exploratory approach, aimed at examining key propositions to elucidate the nature of China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and its economic ambitions through the BRI. It is crucial to note that our data, derived from Jakarta's university students, offers a specific perspective: a snapshot of Indonesia's educated youth, particularly those informed about international relations, and their views on the dynamics between Indonesia and China. As such, our findings should not be extrapolated as representative of the wider Indonesian public opinion. They should be interpreted as a focused insight into the sentiments of a distinct demographic that is knowledgeable about these geopolitical matters. This study does not delve into the underlying factors that may influence the observed correlations, nor does it aim to provide a comprehensive causal analysis. Our primary objective is to probe into a set of targeted hypotheses that merit further scholarly investigation.

This article contributes to two strands of literature. First, this study fills the gaps of previous studies on the perception of the Indonesian public towards the rise of China. Previous studies have focused on the perceptions of policymakers, political actors, or bureaucratic elites in Indonesia toward China (Fitriani 2018; Herlijanto 2022; Karim et al. 2023; Yeremia 2022). This article compliments the existing literature by examining how Indonesian university students perceive the rise of China, especially on the two key issues of the South China Sea and the BRI. Second, this article contributes to testing the existence of the China threat theory among the Indonesian public. Much literature has discussed the public perception of China in countries such as the United States (US), South Korea, and several European countries (Gries et al. 2012; Gries and Crowson 2010; Jung and Jeong 2016a; Yang and Liu 2012).

Several studies have been conducted to unearth the Indonesian public perception of China. The ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute commissioned the Indonesia National Survey Project (INSP) in order to improve understanding of economic, social, and political changes in Indonesia (Fossati et al. 2017). Although part of the INSP comprehensively elaborates on the Indonesian public's perspective of China, it does not provide further statistical analysis to unpack the correlation between the public perception of China's economic domination and assertiveness in South China Sea with the increasing perception of China as a threat. Fitriani (2021) specifically highlights the evolving views of young Indonesians, noting a shift towards skepticism over the

peaceful nature of China's rise, and a general wariness influenced by both historical legacies and current geopolitical maneuvers. Another study by Sonoda (2021) delves into Indonesian students' attitudes towards China, albeit in a comparative context with other Asian nations, concluding that Indonesian students generally perceive China's influence positively.

However, these studies do not concentrate on the specific subset of Indonesian university students in the capital, where political, economic, and social currents may distinctly shape attitudes and perspectives. This presents a gap in the existing research. Our work seeks to bridge this gap by honing in on this demographic, specifically examining their perceptions amidst the heightened tensions in the South China Sea and the implications of the BRI, thereby providing a focused lens on the attitudes of future influencers within Indonesia's urban educational hubs.

This article is divided into several sections. The following section is a literature review where we derive sets of hypotheses to test the China threat theory. The third section provides a discussion on the methodology used in this article. The fourth section analyses our findings regarding the Indonesian public perception of China, while the final section concludes the findings and their implications.

2 Literature Review

This study delves into the specific perceptions of China held by university students in Indonesia's capital, with a focus on their views concerning the South China Sea dispute and the BRI. The prevailing discourse on the 'China threat' typically frames it within economic, security, and political dimensions (Al-Rodhan 2007; Broomfield 2003; Goodman 2017a; Yang and Liu 2012). Our literature review critically examines these facets of the perceived threat and their relevance to the educated urban youth of Jakarta. From this review, we formulate a series of hypotheses about the nature of these perceptions, which we then scrutinize in the analysis section of this study. By centering on this demographic, which is positioned at the intersection of education and urbanity in the heart of Indonesia, we aim to present a nuanced understanding of how China is viewed by these future leaders and influencers.

2.1 Economic Aspect

Several pieces of literature have looked at how the rise of China's economy is perceived as an economic threat to both developed and developing countries (Karim and Susanto 2021). This is because China is considered to have carried out economic manipulation that could benefit its business actors. For example, Al Rodhan (2007) argues that China is regarded as an economic threat to developed countries because it often violates intellectual property (IP) rights; these illegal practices cause huge losses for business from developed countries, especially due to software piracy. According to a report from Glaser (2019), China was ranked first in cases of IP infringement globally, and was involved in 90% of all IP cases that occurred between 2011 and 2018. China also carries out cyber espionage, resulting in losses to several US companies of about US\$300 billion per year. As China does not comply with IP

regulations on neither the domestic nor international scales, these violations can be identified as threats to the national interests of developed countries such as the US (Brander et al. 2017).

In contrast to the perceived threat to developed countries, China is considered a threat by developing countries on two levels. First, China's is attempting to dominate the global economy over developing countries. One indicator of China's economic dominance efforts can be the BRI, which is poised to become the world's most ambitious and extensive developmental endeavor, epitomizing China's 'geoeconomic' clout (Zhang and James 2023). The BRI does so by extending loans or investments to nations involved in the project, thereby cementing China's influence on a global scale (Sarker et al. 2018). According to Damuri et al. (2019), a country's dependence on China increases because infrastructure loans – such as in the case of Indonesia's participation in the BRI – bring with them several threats, such as the threat of debt trap where debts become challenging or impossible to repay. This situation could allow the Chinese government to leverage the debt burden of smaller countries for geopolitical advantages. Based on this literature review, it can be argued that the dominance of China in the Indonesian economy might worsen the perception of the Indonesian people towards China.

The second threat is the economic threat perceived to be posed by Chinese workers, who are employed in many of China's infrastructure projects in developing countries. Indeed, through the BRI, China has disbursed investment funds for infrastructure development in several participating developing countries while incorporating Chinese workers as part of the conditions for such investment. Moreover, most Chinese companies investing in developing countries prefer to employ workers from China rather than the host country, leading to arguments that China-led projects only benefit Chinese migrant workers (Rakhmat and Tarahita 2020). For example, in the case of Indonesia, there has been a surge of Chinese migrant workers in the country due to China's increasing investments, from 17,515 Chinese nationals in 2015 to just over 30,000 in 2018 (Rakhmat and Nugroho, 2019). At the same time, Indonesia's unemployment rate stands at approximately 5%, and according to Indonesian statistics Agency (2023), the informal sector encompasses 59.31% of the workforce, with a higher prevalence of informal economy workers in rural areas. This data suggests that a significant portion of Indonesians, particularly those in rural regions, could be available for employment opportunities.

While the absolute number might be relatively low compared to neighboring countries like Singapore and Malaysia, the presence of 30,000 Chinese foreign workers in Indonesia, country of 275 million people, has raised concerns among some Indonesians about their impact on the country's economy. Unlike Singapore and, to some extent, Malaysia, where the labor markets are more open to foreigners, Indonesia has a relatively closed labor market. This is due to a number of factors, including concerns about protecting local jobs, preserving national security, and ensuring that foreign workers have the necessary skills and qualifications to work in Indonesia (Setiawan and Karim 2022). Moreover, many Indonesian workers are still not absorbed in the formal sector. The Indonesian state therefore imposes strict quotas and requirements for foreign workers to ensure that local workers are given priority.

Based on the explanation above, we draw the following hypothesis: *(H1) The perception of growing numbers of Chinese workers in Indonesia is correlated with increasing negative public perception of China.*

2.2 Security Aspect

In terms of security, some scholars have investigated the link between China's economic revival and the modernization of its military capabilities. China's growing military capability is perceived as a security and military threat by both developed and developing countries, as it could create unstable regional security conditions. Yee and Storey (2013) identify China's military modernization as the main factor behind China being seen as a security threat, because its modernization has intensified ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

China has a significant impact on world economic growth, contributing 15.3 per cent of the total world Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2021 (Richter 2022). Its economic growth has also led to increased military spending, particularly on modernizing the country's military capacity. Globally, China is ranked second after the US as the country with the largest military budget (Tian et al. 2020). In 2019, China spent US\$175.4 billion on its military, including improving training facilities for soldiers, increasing the development of renewable technologies in weapons and other tools, and other forms of modernization (Mastro 2019). China has also purchased several advanced technology fighter aircrafts and submarines from Russia and purchased or built more than one aircraft carrier (Bitzinger 2018; Cheung 2018).

While China's military spending is still significantly lower than that of the US, many countries in Asia see its rapid growth and increasing capabilities are seen as a significant challenge to the regional balance of power. This is because such increases could lead to a military arms race among Southeast Asian countries, given that Southeast Asian governments regard China's naval power build-up as part of China's goal to project its military might to the region; this could prompt Southeast Asian states to act in an attempt to adjust the power imbalance with China (Karim and Chairil 2016).

When viewed in the context of developed countries, China's military capability enhancement appears to aim to compete with US hegemony in the Asian region. However, when viewed from the context of Southeast Asian developing countries, greater military capabilities will only cause instability and insecurity for the region.

In recent years, China has become more assertive in territorial disputes in the South China Sea. This is particularly evident in the country's policies regarding the South China Sea. First, Chinese policy is to expel US warships that enter its claimed territory by performing dangerous maneuvers (Yahuda 2013). Second, China has interfered with US patrol boats operating in the South China Sea area by flying Y-12 planes low to expel them, and threatening further actions if US vessels did not leave the area (Thayer 2010). Third, China builds nationalistic propaganda to convince the Chinese public about the country's territorial claims in the South China Sea, such as by including disputed areas in the maps printed in Chinese passports (Buszynski and Roberts 2015). Fourth, China sends military ships to other countries' exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and illegally exploits marine resources in those waters (Suryadinata 2016). Overall, China's assertive policies in the South China Sea

likely exacerbate the increasing anti-China sentiment among the Indonesian public. Hence, it might be argued that China's assertiveness in the South China Sea may have cemented the perception of China as a threat toward Indonesian sovereignty.

Given that the security aspect cannot be separated from the economic, it is important to understand the relationship between the perception of Indonesia's economic dependence on China and the perception of the Indonesian government's largely positive attitude towards China. China uses its economic power to effectively force countries to agree with Chinese policies in international conflicts, including in the South China Sea (Yu 2017). The most visible such case is Cambodia's disapproval of the South China Sea Code of Conduct, in which Cambodia decided not to agree with the Code, in order to secure Chinese investment in their country. In this case, Cambodia disapproved of the Philippines' protestations regarding the threat to sovereignty posed by China in the South China Sea. This led to a split of opinion within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which had never previously occurred since its formation (Thayer 2013).

For Indonesia, the dispute in the South China Sea is a serious problem and requires a firm response from the government of Indonesia because it impacts the (in)security of its sovereign territory. This is because China's claims in the region include the Natuna Islands, which is an Indonesian EEZ. Moreover, China has committed several violations that threaten Indonesian sovereignty in the North Natuna Sea. Despite this, the Indonesian government has responded by ignoring the issue and being indecisive toward China, which can be traced to Indonesia's dependence on Chinese investment for infrastructure development (Darusman et al. 2020). From this discussion, we draw the second hypothesis: *(H2) The perception of Indonesia's economic dependence on China correlates with the perception of the Indonesian government being unassertive in responding to China with regards to the South China Sea.*

2.3 Political Aspects

Existing literature also discusses how the strength of China's trade cooperation with other countries can increase China's political and ideological influence on other countries. Yang and Liu (2012) view China as a threat because China is the only major and revisionist communist country that promotes authoritarian values. In addition, China is considered an ideological threat because it promotes values that are contrary to the dominant liberal world order, including through the use of Chinese soft power, such as culture, economic development models, and an alternative political system (Gill and Huang 2006).

However, the extent to which China is considered a threat cannot be separated from the domestic political process within the perceiving country, the most crucial element of which is the presence of political cleavage or polarization. As stated by Gries and Crowson (2010), compared to people holding liberal views, conservatives in the US perceive China's rise as a significantly greater threat and hold more negative views of the Chinese government. Gries et al. (2012) further suggest both direct and indirect effects of ideology toward American attitudes toward China on policy preferences, the latter effects being differentially mediated by prejudice and attitudes toward the Chinese government. They found that the effects of Americans' ideologies

of support for tougher containment policies toward China are differentially mediated through attitudes toward China's people and government.

However, political polarization alone does not explain why China is perceived as a threat by some and not others. As Liang (2017) suggests, perceptions of China's rise are political constructs built to serve the political agenda of bureaucratic elites. Hence an anti-China narrative within domestic political discourse likely plays an important role in affecting overall public perception towards China. In the context of Indonesia, anti-China sentiment has become a political campaign tool. Yeremia (2022) shows how Indonesian opposition parties use anti-China rhetoric to criticize President Widodo's government. Based on the explanation above, we draw the third hypothesis as follows: *(H3) People who supported the successful 2019 presidential candidate pair of Joko Widodo - Ma'ruf Amin tend to have a more positive perception of the Belt and Road Initiative compared to people who supported the unsuccessful 2019 presidential candidate pair of Prabowo Subianto - Sandiaga Uno.*

Moreover, the Indonesian public tends to criticize government policies that are considered indecisive in resolving problems in the South China Sea. This is because such indecisiveness is seen as a factor that increases China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. Senior policymakers representing the second-term Widodo government, such Coordinating Minister of Maritime Affairs and Investment, Luhut Pandjaitan, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi, have issued several statements denying China's claims in the Natuna Sea. However, the Chinese government has only responded with normative statements, stating that China recognizes Indonesia's sovereignty over the Natuna Islands and its 12-mile territorial waters, but not Indonesia's EEZ, which reaches 200 nautical miles offshore (Majumdar 2021). Based on the explanation above, we draw the fourth hypothesis as follows: *(H4) The perception of the Indonesian government's lack of firmness correlates with increasing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea.*

2.4 Methodology

This article examines the perception of educated young Indonesians in Jakarta and surrounding areas (Bogor, Bekasi, Tangerang, and Depok) towards the threat of China. The focus sits on two issues: cooperation between Indonesia and China through the BRI, and territorial disputes in South China Sea. The number of recent studies on the BRI are increasing, with a significant portion undertaken by Chinese academics. Interpretations of the BRI vary by region, with scholars in China often highlighting its potential for development, growth, and sustainability. In contrast, Western academics tend to focus on geopolitics, political strategies, and concerns about debt sustainability (Beeson and Crawford 2023; Khanal and Zhang 2023). Specifically, in the context of Indonesia, the BRI is viewed through a dual lens, as both an opportunity for economic advancement and a potential security concern due to the risk of falling into a debt trap (Damuri et al. 2019). As a result, the BRI is perceived to be an instrument of China's economic domination (Shah 2021).

The second element our research explored is respondents' perception of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, which has been the focus of heated debates several times in recent years in Indonesia due to China's assertive attitude in the South China

Sea, which threatens the northern Indonesian region of the Natuna Islands (Hu 2023). Furthermore, a growing US-China rivalry has intensified tension in the South China Sea. This stems from different outlook of the region: China prioritizes sovereignty and security in the region, whereas the US focuses more on ensuring freedom of access (Hu 2021).

Given our focus on the perceptions of educated young Indonesians in Jakarta and surrounding areas, our sampling frame is all registered students from universities in Jakarta who also live in Jakarta or neighboring areas. The sampling frame provides a starting point for the researchers to identify potential participants. We utilize purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that allows us to select participants relevant to the research question. This purposive sampling method has some limitations, especially regarding the generalizability and representativeness of the findings, and the procedure might result in selection bias should the criteria used to select participants not represent the larger population (Etikan 2016).

However, in our case, the choice to employ purposive sampling is justifiable. As the literature suggests, higher levels of education and wealth are connected with a greater inclination to answer survey questions on foreign policy (Berinsky 2013). In other words, public opinion on foreign policy disproportionately reflects the sentiments of a chosen group, which can be described as a relatively educated and affluent ‘foreign policy public’ rather than the general public.

This research focuses on Jakarta and its neighboring areas. The selection of Jakarta as the focal point is grounded in its notable distinction for having the highest level of educational attainment among its residents, which can correlate with a heightened awareness and understanding of geopolitical issues (BPS, 2021). Additionally, Jakarta’s role as the epicenter of Indonesian policy-making and international diplomacy provides a unique vantage point for assessing the influence of China’s regional activities on local attitudes. Furthermore, as Indonesia’s capital city, Jakarta represents a microcosm of the nation’s diverse socio-political dynamics. It is a city that not only reflects Indonesia’s socio-political climate but also sets the tone for political influence and public opinion across the archipelago. Jakarta’s recognition as a socio-political barometer, as noted by Afrimadona (2021), further validates its selection; the city’s experiences and reactions are indicative of national sentiments and trends. Consequently, examining Jakarta’s perspective on the China threat allows for insights that are likely to resonate with or signal the wider Indonesian context.

In this study, we focus on students currently studying at a university in Jakarta or its surrounds. This is because tertiary education students have a greater ability to analyze political information and make decisions from that information (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Additionally, people with higher education are likely exposed to a broader range of information, develop critical thinking skills, and may have more resources and knowledge at their disposal. As a result, they are likely to have more informed and nuanced perspectives on political issues, including on China.

Moreover, university students are often more politically engaged and informed than the general population. They are more likely to follow current events, participate in political discussions, and have more exposure to diverse perspectives. Studying the perceptions of young, educated individuals can also provide a window into future political trends, as members of this group are likely to be the future leaders and

decision-makers. Understanding their views and perspectives can help inform strategies for engaging with this important demographic and shaping the country's future political landscape.

This study uses primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through an online survey conducted on 15–25 April 2022. Secondary data was obtained through a literature review. The survey involved 403 respondents. The background of the respondents can be seen in Table 1. Most respondents are in the age range of 21 to 25 years (76.25 per cent), majoring in social studies/humanities (43 per cent), and voted for the presidential candidate pair Widodo - Amin in the 2019 election (62.8 per cent).

We compiled questions to probe respondents' perception of China as a threat. We used inferential statistics in further analyzing the survey results. Tests using inferential statistical methods can be divided into three depending on the purpose of the examiner namely evaluate differences, examine relationships, and make predictions (Allua and Thompson 2009). This article uses inferential statistics to test four hypotheses. Hypotheses H1, H2, and H4 use the Spearman correlation method, which is a non-parametric technique to find correlations in conditions when the two measured variables are in the form of a ranking or ordinal scale. The Spearman correlation is stronger than Pearson when used in abnormal bivariate distribution data. However, the weakness of the Spearman method compared to the Pearson method is that the results of the Pearson method are sharper and can be explored further (Bishara and Hittner 2012). H3 uses the independent sample t-test method, which is a statistical parametric test to determine the average difference between two groups on several dependent variables measured at the interval or ratio level.

This article has limitations due to the purposive nature of our data. The research does not look at causality but only the correlation of the two data variables.

Table 1 Background of survey respondents

Category		Percentage of Respondents
Age	15 to 20 years old	13.4%
	21 to 25 years old	76.25%
	26 to 30 years old	2.7%
	31 to 35 years old	1.2%
	36+ years old	26%
	University background	Social Sciences/Humanities
Art and Design		3%
Law		4%
Medicine and Health		14%
IT and Engineering		12%
Economy		14%
Education and Literature		6%
Tourist		2%
Others		2%
Political preference in 2019 presidential election		Widodo – Amin
	Prabowo – Uno	37.2%

3 Findings and Discussions

3.1 Overview of the Survey

This section provides an overview of the survey regarding students' perceptions of China's economic dominance and the perceived threat posed by China to Indonesian sovereignty. We developed a series of survey questions that can provide an understanding of the extent to which China's economic dominance in Indonesia worsens the perception of the Indonesian people towards China. The results obtained are presented in Table 2.

The first question respondents were asked was "Do you think that the cooperation between Indonesia and China will increase negative sentiment among the Indonesian public?". The majority of respondents (60.8 per cent) indicated that closer cooperation would intensify negative sentiment toward China among Indonesian society; 39.2 per cent said otherwise. We then asked respondents' opinion of Indonesia's intensive efforts to find Chinese investors to finance 28 major infrastructure development projects. We asked if respondents think that China's investment could make Indonesia dependent on China. 75.9 per cent agreed with this, while 24.1 per cent did not think that Chinese investment would make Indonesia dependent on China. The next question we asked was whether China's investment through the BRI for infrastructure development, such as the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail, is what the community needs. 74.9 per cent of respondents answered yes, and only 25.1 per cent answered no.

Overall, the survey shows that more than 60 per cent of respondents consider that closer economic cooperation between Indonesia and China can lead to greater negative perceptions. However, when respondents were asked whether the closer economic cooperation benefited Indonesia, the majority stated that Chinese investment through the BRI was needed by the community. This means that although economic cooperation with China is perceived as potentially making Indonesia dependent on China, this cooperation is nevertheless considered beneficial for infrastructure development in Indonesia.

Table 2 Perceptions of cooperation between Indonesia and China

No	Question	Result (%)	
		Yes	No
1	Do you think cooperation between Indonesia and China will increase negative sentiment toward China among the Indonesian public?	245 (60.8%)	158 (39.2%)
2	Do you think a large amount of Chinese investment in the infrastructure sector can make Indonesia dependent on China?	306 (75.9%)	97 (24.1%)
3	Do you think that China's investment through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for infrastructure development, such as the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed train, is what the community needs?	302 (74.9%)	101 (25.1%)

The results shows that high levels of Chinese economic activity in Indonesia worsens the perception of the Indonesian public towards China. Respondents generally see Chinese economic dominance through the BRI as a threat. One possible reason behind this is unfavorable historical factors that still influence Indonesian attitudes towards China today. According to Zhou (2014), Indonesia's closeness with China under the leadership of President Sukarno (1945-67), alongside the popularity of communism (and subsequent crackdown) during this period, has led to many Indonesians not wanting relations between the two countries to be re-established. This is because China is considered to be involved in the alleged coup event in 1965, in which the Indonesian Communist Party was accused of attempting to overthrow the Sukarno regime, leading to anti-Communist violence and the rise the New Order military regime (Suryadinata 1990; Tegep et al. 2019). Moreover, long-standing ethnic tensions, primarily directed towards Indonesians of Chinese heritage, may affect the perception of the Indonesian public toward China. This tension is due to the historical factors mentioned above as well as a perceived gap in economic status between Indonesians of Chinese and non-Chinese heritage (Tan, 2001).

One might argue that it is Indonesia's strategic culture to view external dominating powers critically. This is because foreign economic domination is seen as a continuation of Western colonialism. Furthermore, after the collapse of the Sukarno government, the West, particularly the US and its close allies, made significant economic inroads into Indonesia. This can be seen by the fact that the US controlled virtually all aspects of the mining industry in the Papua region with the support of Suharto's New Order authoritarian regime. This created an anti-'foreign economic domination' discourse within Indonesia;¹ such discourse became even more evident after the collapse of Suharto in 1998, leading to increased economic nationalism among Indonesia's policymakers (Patunru 2018).

Although Western economic domination over Indonesia since 1967 has not necessarily led to severe negative political consequences, the rise of China raises concerns about the potential for political and strategic shifts. This is because although Western dominance is seen as a hegemonic power posing a threat to the region, this perspective does not necessarily translate into concerns that Western influence directly endangers Indonesia's sovereignty. In the case of China's rise, the interlinking of foreign economic domination and territorial issues means that Sino-Indonesia relations might differ from other or previous interactions with significant powers.

While the exact nature and extent of the threat posed by China's actions in the South China Sea are uncertain, they could have significant implications for Indonesia's sovereignty, security, and regional influence. Do Indonesians perceive China's assertiveness in the South China Sea as a threat to Indonesia's sovereignty? A perceived threat appears warranted given recent development on the South China Sea. First, in December 2021, a Chinese diplomat sent a letter to the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejecting Indonesian oil and gas drilling on the North Natuna offshore platform. The government of China claims this area as part of its territory, even though the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) legally recognizes the area as an Indonesian EEZ (Allard et al. 2021).

¹ We thank reviewer 1 for this suggestion.

Second, an increasing number of Chinese fishing vessels are visiting the North Natuna Sea escorted by military patrol boats. There have been many reports of fishing vessels from China capturing fish using tools and technology that can damage marine ecosystems in the waters of the North Natuna Sea, causing local fishermen to worry for their safety when fishing in the area at the same time as ships from China (Beech et al. 2020). In response to these developments, Indonesia has taken a strategic approach by bolstering its coast guard capabilities. This move is part of a broader ‘paragunboat diplomacy’ strategy, aimed at countering maritime coercion while maintaining a non-confrontational stance. By relying on non-military maritime constabulary forces, Indonesia seeks to assert its authority in its waters, deterring adversaries effectively without directly challenging China (Putra 2023). This strategy not only ensures the safety of local fishermen but also demonstrates Indonesia’s commitment to safeguarding its maritime interests through a balanced and tactical approach.

Third, in 2017, the Government of Indonesia released a new map of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. In it, the government officially named the area disputed by China in the South China Sea as the ‘North Natuna Sea’. China strongly opposed the map’s release and requested the Indonesian government to immediately change the area’s name. This has become a longer term problem because the Chinese government has clearly asked the Indonesian government to cease calling the area the North Natuna Sea (Suryadinata and Izzuddin 2017).

With this context in mind, a survey question was developed to determine whether respondents perceive China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea as a threat. The results from the survey questions are presented in Table 3.

We find that 86.6 per cent of respondents saw China’s strong protestations over Indonesia’s efforts to drill offshore oil as a threat to Indonesian sovereignty. Furthermore, 88.3 per cent of respondents perceived China’s claims to the South China Sea as a threat to Indonesia’s sovereignty. This shows that, although Indonesia is not a claimant state in the South China Sea territorial conflict, China’s assertiveness in the region is nevertheless perceived as a threat. This is because the South China Sea intersects with Indonesia’s exclusive economic sovereignty in the North Natuna Sea.

Table 3 Survey of perceptions of China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea

No	Questions	Result (%)	
		Yes	No
1	Do you think China’s protests over oil and natural gas drilling in the North Natuna region threaten Indonesia’s sovereignty?	349 (86.6%)	54 (13.4%)
2	Do you think China’s claim in the South China Sea, which intersects with the North Natuna region, threatens Indonesia’s sovereignty?	356 (88.3%)	47 (11.7%)
3	Do you think China’s assertive stance in the South China Sea is motivated by its economic revival?	339 (84.1%)	64 (15.9%)
4	Will the dispute in the South China Sea worsen economic cooperation between Indonesia and China in the future?	299 (74.2%)	104 (25.8%)

Respondents also showed a tendency to have a negative view over how disputes in the South China Sea will impact the long-term economic relations of Indonesia and China. The majority of respondents (76.2 per cent) stated that the disputes are harming China-Indonesia economic relations, showing that there is a strong link between security threats and the perception of economic cooperation. Respondents were also asked whether China's assertive attitude in the South China Sea was motivated by its economic revival. Around 84 per cent of respondents agreed with this question.

3.2 Inferential Statistical Analysis

We have established that China's economic dominance as well as its assertiveness in South China Sea has negatively influenced Indonesian university students' perceptions of China. In this section, we will unpack how a perception that the number of foreign workers from China in Indonesia is increasing, is correlated with an increasingly negative perception of China. As explained in the literature review, Chinese workers represent the largest group of foreign workers in Indonesia, making up 37,711 people or 42 per cent of the total foreign workers in Indonesia (Yanwardhana 2022). This is because Chinese investors prefer to employ Chinese workers rather than local workers (Anwar 2019). Therefore, we wanted to test whether the increase in Chinese workers in Indonesia relates to the worsening public perception of China. Given that Indonesia has difficulty providing employment opportunities for new entrants to the labor market, the arrival of workers from China further reduces job opportunities for Indonesian nationals (Tegep et al. 2019).

Based on the explanation above, a survey question was developed in the form of a level of agreement from a score of 1 to 5, which represents from strongly disagree to strongly agree as follows:

X1 = With the increase in Chinese investment in Indonesia, the number of foreign workers from China will also increase (question no. 4).

Y1 = With the increasing number of foreign workers from China, there is an increasing negative sentiment of Indonesian people towards China (question no. 5).

The results of the analysis are displayed in Table 4.

Based on these results, the significance value is ($0.000 < 0.01$), meaning there is a significant relationship between statement X1 and statement Y1. Because the correlation coefficient is positive, at 0.437, statement X1 is positively and significantly related to statement Y1. This can be interpreted that the perception that the increase

Table 4 Inferential statistical results on H2

Correlations			X1	Y1
Spearman's Rho	X1	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.437**
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.	0.000
		N	403	403
	Y1	Correlation Coefficient	0.437**	1.000
		Sig. (1-tailed)	0.000	.
		N	403	403

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

in Chinese foreign workers in Indonesia is due to the entry of Chinese investment is correlated with the increasing negative perception of China.

This finding is in line with Rochadi (2021), who argues that the negative perception of the Indonesian public towards foreign workers from China has its roots in the colonial period, due to high levels of job competition. Rakhmat and Tarahita (2020) also argue that although the Indonesian government welcomes investment from China, the Indonesian people generally reject the presence of foreign workers from China. This has been confirmed by multiple public demonstrations in recent years protesting against Chinese workers in several parts of Indonesia, such as a demonstration that took place in Southeast Sulawesi in 2020 (Chew 2020).

Furthermore, we want to see how the perception of Indonesia's economic dependence on China correlates with the perception that the Indonesian government is insufficiently assertive in responding to Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. The Indonesian government is seen as being not being assertive enough in the context of Chinese actors illegally taking resources in the North Natuna Sea (Tiola and Dinarto 2020) and the Chinese government rejecting the new Indonesia's map over the South China Sea (Suryadinata 2017), protesting Indonesian drilling in the North Natuna Sea (Allard et al. 2021), and using military vessels to guard fishing vessels and scaring local fishermen (Beech et al. 2020). Indonesia responded to these incidents only through diplomatic letters and increasing its military presence in the North Natuna region (Meyer et al. 2019). However, many Indonesian political elites consider these moves to be insufficiently assertive. Although Indonesia has taken some steps to oppose China's claims, these have not been strong enough to stop China's arbitrary actions (Santosa 2020).

The lack of firm attitude from the Government of Indonesia towards China is widely seen as part of its strategy to secure Chinese investment for infrastructure development. This is because Indonesia is involved in the BRI and has received significant financial investment for the construction of several key infrastructure projects, such as the construction of the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed train, which is estimated to cost approximately US\$6 billion (Afifa 2021).

Based on the explanation above, a survey question was developed in the form of a level of agreement from a score of 1 to 5, which represents from strongly disagree to strongly agree as follows:

X2=With the Belt and Road Initiative, Indonesia's economic dependence on China is increasing (question no. 2).

Y2=Indonesia's response in the South China Sea is unassertive due to Indonesia's dependence on China for infrastructure development (question no. 8).

The results of the analysis are displayed in Table 5.

From the table above, there is a significant relationship between statement X2 and statement Y2, considering the significance value ($0.000 < 0.01$). In addition, the relationship between X2 and Y2 is positive, with a value of 0.436. It can be interpreted that the perception of Indonesia's economic dependence on China is positively correlated with the perceived lack of firmness from the Government of Indonesia in its responses to China. This means that the higher Indonesia's economic dependence on

Table 5 Inferential statistical results on H4

Correlations			X4	Y4
Spearman's Rho	X2	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.436**
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.	0.000
		N	403	403
	Y2	Correlation Coefficient	0.436**	1.000
		Sig. (1-tailed)	0.000	.
		N	403	403

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

Table 6 Inferential statistical results on H6

Correlations			X6	Y6
Spearman's rho	X6	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.528**
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.	0.000
		N	403	403
	Y6	Correlation Coefficient	0.528**	1.000
		Sig. (1-tailed)	0.000	.
		N	403	403

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

China becomes, the more the Government of Indonesia's response is considered to be insufficiently firm.

The fourth hypothesis focuses on the perception that the Indonesian government's lack of firmness is correlated with the perception of China being increasingly assertive in the South China Sea. The discussion above clearly demonstrates how China's activities in the North Natuna Sea have crossed reasonable limits. Their actions should be firmly responded to by the Indonesian government so that Chinese assertiveness does not continue and cause unrest for the local people.

However, this is a challenge for Indonesia. Due to its reliance on Chinese investment for infrastructure development, Indonesia cannot freely respond to China's activities in Natuna. Doing so would create tension between the two countries (Nie 2016), especially considering that economic cooperation between Indonesia and China is not only in infrastructure but also in trade, investment, health, and technology (Yu 2017). However, resolving problems in the South China Sea between Indonesia and China through peaceful dialogue has not provided a permanent solution. China recognizes Indonesia's sovereignty over the Natuna Islands, but it does not recognize Indonesia's EEZ of the area 200 miles from the coastline (Majumdar 2021).

Based on the explanation above, survey questions were developed in the form of a level of agreement from a score of 1 to 5, representing from strongly disagree to strongly agree as follows:

X4=Indonesia's response in the South China Sea is unassertive due to Indonesia's dependence on China for infrastructure development (question no. 8).

Y4=One of the negative effects of China's rise is China's assertive attitude in the South China Sea (question no. 9).

The results of the analysis are displayed in Table 6.

The table above shows a significant relationship between statement X4 and statement Y4, considering the significance value ($0.000 < 0.01$). Furthermore, since the correlation coefficient is positive, namely 0.528, statement X6 is positively related to statement Y6. This can be interpreted that the lack of firmness in Indonesia's response is positively correlated with increasingly assertiveness from China in the South China Sea.

This finding is consistent with China's increasing assertiveness and Indonesia's lack of assertiveness over time. According to Sulaiman (2020), Indonesia's response to China in the South China Sea has not brought about a change in China's attitude, as China continues to be assertive in the region.

Indeed, there is a perception that Indonesia does not do enough in terms of containing China due to an overall narrative built by President Widodo about the benefit of greater cooperation between the two countries (Agastia 2023; Karim et al. 2023). However, on the military front, Indonesia has increased its military presence in the Natuna Islands and conducted military exercises in the area. This has included deploying additional naval vessels, fighter jets, and troops to the region. Additionally, Indonesia has announced plans to develop a military base on the Natuna Islands, which would further enhance its military presence in the area (Parameswaran 2015).

These policies can be seen as part of Indonesia's hedging strategy toward China. As Kuik (2008; 2016, 2024) articulates, hedging is a nuanced and often contentious approach, characterized by a mix of opposing and deliberately ambiguous policies under uncertain conditions. It involves maximizing benefits from various powers while preparing for potential risks, such as misjudgment, entrapment, or abandonment. Similarly, Goh (2005, 2019) describes hedging as a strategy to avoid decisive alignments, often through soft balancing tactics like leveraging major powers against each other. Reflecting this, Indonesia's hedging strategy in dealing with China's claims in the South China Sea can be seen from the following policies: (1) economic pragmatism, through cooperation between Indonesia and China in the field of trade and investment; (2) indirect balancing, which is carried out by Indonesia by building military and security cooperation relations with the United States (Goh 2005); (3) dominance denial, where Indonesia rejects China's influence in Indonesia without the influence of other big powers that can provide a balance; and (4) binding engagement through strategic cooperation between Indonesia and China (Lim and Cooper 2015).

The next issue to explore is how differences in voter political preferences correlate with perceptions of China as a threat. Indeed, in general, as Burhani (2019) notes, conservative Indonesians preferred the 2019 presidential candidate pair of Prabowo-Uno, while liberal Indonesians preferred Widodo-Amin. As suggested in the literature review, many studies have shown that ideological and political preferences affect how people view China. Hence, we focus on how differences in preferences in the 2019 presidential election affect the level of threat perception toward China. We hypothesize that people who supported the successful candidate pair of Widodo-Amin tend to have a more positive perception of Indonesia-China cooperation than those who supported the unsuccessful pair of Prabowo-Uno. The results of the analysis are displayed in tabular form below in Table 7.

In general, both Widodo-Amin and Prabowo-Uno supporters positively perceive the Belt and Road Initiative. As seen in Table 7, around 84 per cent of Widodo-Amin

Table 7 Breakdown of sentiment based on 2019 presidential preferences

	Total	Positive sentiment towards China	Negative sentiment towards China
Supporters of Joko Widodo - Ma'ruf Amin	253 (62.8%)	213 (84%)	40 (16%)
Supporters of Prabowo Subianto - Sandiaga Uno	150 (37.2%)	89 (59%)	61 (41%)

Table 8 Descriptive Statistical on Differences in Presidential Candidates

Group Statistics				
2019 Presidential Candidate Preference	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Joko Widodo - Ma'ruf Amin	253	3.71	0.798	0.050
Prabowo Subianto - Sandiaga Uno	150	2.99	1.117	0.091

Table 9 Statistical results of the independent Sample t-test method on H3

Independent Samples Test									
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	7.812	0.005	7.527	401	0.000	0.721	0.096	0.533	0.909
Equal variances not assumed			6.925	239.738	0.000	0.721	0.104	0.516	0.926

supporters view the BRI as positive, compared to just 59 per cent of Prabowo-Uno supporters. In terms of means, Widodo-Amin supporters are generally more positive (with a mean of 3.71) than those who supported Prabowo-Uno (2.99) (see Table 8). However, we want to see if there is a significant difference in these levels of perception between the two groups of supporters. Based on the Independent Samples Test (see Table 9), statistically, there is a significant difference between the perceptions of Widodo-Amin and Prabowo-Uno supporters towards China, considering the value of Sig. (2-tailed) < 0.05. Widodo-Amin supporters tend to have a more positive perception of BRI than those who supported Prabowo-Uno. Thus, hypothesis 3 can be accepted.

The results of the analysis above align with Burhani's argument (2019) that the majority of Prabowo-Uno supporters are conservative, resulting in a tendency for negative perceptions of China. According to Power and Warburton (2020), community polarization between liberals and conservatives occurred as a result of the 2019 presidential campaign, where Widodo had a more secular profile and support from

secular political parties, while Prabowo had a more conservative profile and backing from conservative Islamic and Islamist parties. In other words, conservative individuals likely see China as more of a threat due to the anti-foreign and ultra-nationalist rhetoric that dominates the narrative among Indonesian conservatives, especially since the 2019 election (Bourchier 2019; Mietzner 2020).

4 Conclusion

This article examines how educated young urban Indonesians perceive China as a threat, especially in the context of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and China's economic ambition through the BRI. We find that the negative perception of the Indonesian public towards China increases in line with the perception of the existence of security, economic, and political threats.

Our findings support existing studies on the China threat rhetoric by demonstrating that negative public perception towards China among Indonesian university students aligns with the perception of security, economic, and political threats. This concurs with previous research that highlights concerns over China's increasing military and economic influence (Goodman 2017b; Jeffery 2009; Jung and Jeong 2016a), and its implications for regional stability and sovereignty, particularly in the South China Sea (Majumdar 2021; Meyer et al. 2019). These findings resonate with existing perceptions of the China threat, particularly in terms of economic manipulation (Jung and Jeong 2016b; Ravenhill 2006), and security concerns due to China's assertiveness in the South China Sea (Yee and Storey 2013). However, our study indicates that this perception of China as a threat is moderated by domestic political polarization (Power and Warburton 2020; Warburton 2020). Specifically, individuals with more conservative views, influenced by the anti-foreign and ultra-nationalist rhetoric prevalent among Indonesian conservatives following the 2019 elections, are more likely to perceive China as a greater threat. Consequently, our results align with arguments that perceptions of a Chinese threat emerge not just from security concerns but also from a securitization process. This process highlights that the challenges and limitations associated with the Belt and Road Initiative are primarily institutional, such as issues related to governance, rather than inherently security-related (Shah 2021).

Our research contributes to growing literature in understanding public opinion toward China in Southeast Asia by examining the perception of educated urban Indonesian youth toward China's assertiveness in South China Sea and its economic agenda through the BRI. Our findings reveal three main points: a rising aversion to the influx of Chinese workers; a critical view of the Indonesian government's passive stance towards China's South China Sea policy; and the impact of political affiliations on perceptions of Sino-Indonesian economic initiatives.

By offering a snapshot of student attitudes, our study sheds light on potential trajectories for Indonesia-China relations, especially as these students emerge as the next generation of leaders. While our exploratory research has identified correlations, it has not delved into the causative factors behind these perceptions. It remains for future studies to unravel the underlying causes, such as the possible role of political processes and campaign strategies in shaping anti-China sentiment or how perceived

economic reliance on China might translate into perceptions of threat. Understanding the factors that influence Indonesian university students' views on China will be critical for anticipating the future dynamics of Indonesia-China relations, making it an important avenue for subsequent research.

Our research is primarily exploratory research, focusing on testing primary prepositions that need to be unpacked to understand China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and its pursuit of economic dominance through the BRI. This article does not further explain what factors underpin the correlations. More importantly, this article does not attempt to rigorously provide causal explanation, given our focus primarily on probing several hypotheses worth pursuing. Hence, future research should be conducted to further scrutinize several hypotheses presented in this paper. For instance, while this article has shown that there are significant differences in sentiment between supporters of President Widodo and supporters of his 2019 opponent, Prabowo, it would be worthwhile analyzing what factors drive such differences. For example, it may be the process of politicization that enables the rise of anti-China sentiment in parts of Indonesian society, or it could be the campaign strategies of the 2019 presidential candidates themselves. Moreover, this article has shown the correlation between the perception of Indonesia's economic dependence on China and the perception of the Indonesian government's lack of assertiveness in responding to China in the South China Sea. However, we have no knowledge of what causes such correlation. Other lines of question that can be pursued by future research would be under what conditions the perceived economic dependence might affect the perception of threat toward a particular country.

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Declarations

Competing Interests We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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