

Navigating Indonesia's Engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic Leverage Analysis

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Abstract

This study analyzes Indonesia's engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through the lens of strategic leverage, arguing that Indonesia has proactively utilized its indigenous Global Maritime Axis (GMA) narrative as an instrument of statecraft. Moving beyond conventional frameworks that portray recipient states in reactive postures—such as hedging against threats or simply “buying into” a great power's vision—this study posits that Indonesia's approach is a deliberate, bottom-up process designed to co-opt the BRI to serve pre-existing national interests. The analysis introduces strategic leverage as an alternative framework that unveils how a middle-level power can flexibly shape its engagement with a global initiative, balancing material gains with the preservation of strategic autonomy. The study identifies and examines three distinct forms of leverage employed by Indonesia: resource, bargaining, and investment leverage. Using a qualitative methodology that combines narrative and behavioral analysis, the research demonstrates that Indonesia's interaction with the BRI is not a binary choice of acceptance or rejection, but a nuanced cycle of negotiation and adaptation. The findings indicate that by anchoring its engagement in the GMA narrative, Indonesia has successfully managed the risks of dependency while advancing its developmental and geostrategic objectives, offering a compelling case study of middle power agency in an era of great power competition.

Keywords: Strategic Leverage; Belt and Road Initiative; Global Maritime Axis; Indonesia-China Relations; Narrative

Abstrak

Studi ini menganalisis keterlibatan Indonesia dalam Inisiatif Sabuk dan Jalan (BRI) Tiongkok melalui perspektif *strategic leverage*. Argumen utama penelitian ini adalah

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bahwa Indonesia tidak sekadar menjadi penerima pasif, melainkan secara proaktif memanfaatkan narasi Poros Maritim Dunia (PMD) untuk mengarahkan BRI sesuai kepentingan nasional. Dengan demikian, pendekatan Indonesia tidak hanya berorientasi pada *hedging* atau mengikuti visi kekuatan besar, melainkan merupakan strategi *bottom-up* yang bertujuan mengooptasi inisiatif global ke dalam agenda domestik dan regional. Konsep *strategic leverage* diperkenalkan untuk menjelaskan bagaimana negara menengah dapat merancang pola keterlibatan yang fleksibel, dengan menyeimbangkan perolehan manfaat material dan upaya menjaga otonomi strategis. Studi ini mengidentifikasi tiga bentuk *leverage* yang digunakan Indonesia: sumber daya, tawar-menawar, dan investasi. Dengan menggunakan metodologi kualitatif yang memadukan analisis naratif dan perilaku, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa hubungan Indonesia dengan BRI bersifat dinamis, berupa siklus negosiasi dan adaptasi, bukan pilihan biner antara menerima atau menolak. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa melalui narasi PMD, Indonesia berhasil mengurangi risiko ketergantungan sekaligus memperkuat tujuan pembangunan dan kepentingan geostrategisnya. Kasus ini memberikan gambaran penting tentang agensi negara menengah di tengah persaingan kekuatan besar.

Kata Kunci: *Strategic Leverage*; *Belt and Road Initiative*; Poros Maritim Dunia; Hubungan Indonesia-Tiongkok; Narasi

Introduction

The geopolitical shift to Indo-Pacific has attracted China's attention to intensify its influence in shaping the regional order.¹ This situation encourages Joko Widodo (Jokowi) to actively navigate Indonesia's engagement with China while advancing the country's strategic autonomy. The engagement has entered a decade of comprehensive strategic partnership, representing a profound and closer relations. It deepens mutual trust between the two countries, enhancing China's presence as one of Indonesia's largest trading partners and investors.² Indonesia's increasing trust in China is inseparable from the presence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since Xi Jinping promoted the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSR) in 2013, Indonesia's engagement with China's BRI has elicited multifaceted responses.

Prior literatures argue that BRI provides supportive funding to facilitate economic development and investment in Indonesia.³ China enjoyed "Indonesia's largest trading partner and Indonesia's second largest investor" while also developing progressive and beneficial comprehensive strategic partnerships with Indonesia in the last ten years.⁴ The bilateral trade increased 19.8% year-on-year with a value of \$149.1 billion, while the investment reached \$8.2 billion in 2022.⁵ Compared to ASEAN countries, Indonesia received more investments, amounting to US\$171 billion.⁶ For this reason, the engagement has become a typical high-quality cooperation,⁷ showing "a blessing in disguise"

with material values.⁸ Other literatures also argues that Indonesia's behavior determines a constrained engagement with the BRI, aiming to limit the expansion of BRI projects in Indonesia, which can raise negative sentiments among domestic publics and the risk of threats to Jokowi's regime authority.⁹ In terms of powerhood, Indonesia embraces China's BRI with a nuanced approach of hedging rather than bandwagoning.¹⁰ Within hedging engagement, Indonesia establishes an insurance policy against unpredictable potential threats of China while also fulfilling the aspiration of its foreign policy to enhance the country's powerhood.¹¹ Indonesia's hedging with BRI is based on the country's materialized strategy to ascend to greater power and play a greater role in international relations.

Prior literatures studying Indonesia's engagement with China's BRI concerns a rationalist approach to power politics and materialism. Yet, less attention has been paid to the interplay of materialism and ideationalism. Since a rationalist approach cannot fully perceive it, this study attempts to complement the research gap, arguing that Indonesia engages China's BRI through strategic leverage. It provides an alternative understanding of the prominent interplay of materialism and ideational dimension in shaping the engagement. Scholars have shared various approaches ranging from full or partial acceptance to rejection in response to China's BRI.¹² Notably, Colley and Noort classify it into a buy-in framework. The framework is achieved if the recipient country successfully co-opts and strategically narrates BRI in its way. Conversely, it is unsuccessful if the recipient country partially or incompletely adopts elements of the BRI strategic narrative, shaping partial engagement or rejection.¹³

However, the buy-in framework tends to adopt a top-down process that often overemphasizes China's agency and ignores the partnering country's active role in shaping its engagement with BRI. Hence, this study uses an alternative framework of strategic leverage in understanding the process by which BRI's partnering countries become active actors in shaping their engagement, synergizing with its strategic autonomy. Rather than hedging as a reactive response to reduce Indonesia's dependency on China, bandwagoning to closely align with China, or constraining the BRI projects, strategic leverage concerns with the essence of proactive logic to achieve Indonesia's objectives. Strategic leverage points to normative process turns¹⁴ in a bot¹⁵tom-up process, maintaining the partnering country's autonomy from domination and violation of the BRI while also advancing the nation's identity and the envisioned strategic

goals. The question is, how does Indonesia navigate its engagement with China's BRI in a bottom-up process of strategic leverage? Focusing on Indonesia, this study elaborates how the Global Maritime Axis (GMA) initiated by Jokowi in 2014 is a strategy preceding the presence of BRI, in different terms, and is actively used to advance the country's maritime ambition through engagement with China's BRI. It highlights how Indonesia shapes its engagement by leveraging BRI to advance the Maritime Axis narrative and achieve its own strategic goals. Rather than focusing on a buy-in conception of accepting or rejecting, Indonesia adopts a proactive behavior with nuanced and flexible decision-making, combining adaptation and negotiation strategies.

This study seeks to present theoretical and practical contributions to the study of international relations. First, this study fills the gap in the existing literature of BRI that often focuses on rationalist aspects and less considers the dimension of idealism. Second, this study presents an alternative framework to understand Indonesia's engagement with China's BRI as a bottom-up process of strategic leverage. Fourth, it provides recommendations for policymakers to consider the interplay of material and ideational aspects.

Amalgamating Narrative and Behavioral Analysis

This study uses qualitative methods, employing an amalgamated approach of narrative and behavioral analysis. Narrative analysis integrates story and discourse as a symbolic expression that shapes perceptions and policies influencing the production of the state's behaviors (Rahmahwati, 2024, p. 39). This method highlights how Indonesia's engagement with China's BRI is not solely a mode of decision-making, but it also represents the role of narrative influencing the meaning and reality of the engagement (Godinho, 2016; Rahmahwati, 2024, p. 40). Behavioral analysis refers to psychological analysis highlighting "the micro-foundation of behavior and the psychological attributes of leaders" to explain the macro-level of cooperation or engagement (Mintz, 2007, pp. 160, 168–169; Rahmahwati, 2024, p. 43). This method highlights how Indonesia articulates its narrative into concrete choices and judgments to engage with China's BRI. The amalgamated approach allows for an in-depth analysis of Indonesia's engagement with China beyond simple assessments of power politics and materialism. It seeks to comprehend a nuanced understanding of how Indonesia strategically leverages BRI for Maritime Axis objectives. Data collection primarily refers to secondary data, collecting official and semi-official documents, articles, reports, and websites.

The Interplay between Narrative and Strategic Leverage

Narrative, or the so-called ‘political storytelling,’ plays a key role in the battle of ideas as a requirement for projecting the policies and conveying important strategic messages.¹⁶ Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle identify three levels of narrative analysis: international system, policy, and identity through formation, projection, and reception.¹⁷ Colley and Noort adopt this mechanism to determine states’ responses and policy changes towards China’s BRI strategic narrative¹⁸. The so-called buy-in framework refers to “states are more likely to affiliate with another state’s policy initiatives when they can tell a story about participation that convincingly promises material gain, without undermining their ongoing sense of identity—their ontological security”.¹⁹ Colley and Noort take China’s BRI narrative projection in developing countries with high acceptance, low acceptance, and rejection levels as their case study. Suppose a country accepts BRI at a high level. In that case, China has succeeded in carrying out a buy-in strategy, gaining material benefits without undermining the ontological security of the partnering countries.²⁰ Conversely, the buy-in strategy is considered unsuccessful if the countries respond to a low acceptance or rejection level. However, this framework tends to ignore the proactive role of partnering countries as central agencies in shaping their engagement with China.

This study uses an alternative framework of strategic leverage in analyzing how Indonesia shapes and navigates its engagement with China. It moves beyond a simplistic buy-in binary of accepting or neglecting the presence of BRI without understanding the interplay of Indonesia’s histories, identities, and strategic calculations driving the country to navigate the engagement. Strategic leverage is a negotiation strategy to “consolidate...existing advantages and impede China’s capacity to coerce regional states...convince Beijing that coercive policies are unworkable or prohibitively costly.”²¹ It offers an agency-driven approach highlighting a proactive role with a nuanced, flexible decision-making, allowing the partnering country “to consolidate its relative...power—and organize its...relationship”²² with China’s BRI.

Leverage refers to the use of certain resources, both materially and morally, to achieve a desired goal.²³ Sources of leverage come from both rationalist logic and ideational preferences such as specific knowledge, ideologies, or diplomatic ties.²⁴ Through this approach, Indonesia, as a middle power, flexibly and proactively navigates its engagement with China’s BRI, using

the Maritime Axis narrative as its instrument. To minimize the risks of Chinese expansionism of the BRI, Indonesia uses Anderson's three forms of leverage, combining "capabilities, means, and contexts".²⁵ Focusing on Indonesia's role as the principal agent, the country's interaction with the BRI is a product of strategic leverage, including bargaining, resources, and investment. Bargaining leverage is operationalized to achieve concessions and influence China by considering several aspects, such as funding and politics. Resource leverage refers to the use of material and moral resources, including network-building. In contrast, investment resources utilize investment opportunities to achieve Indonesia's long-term goals. Not only does Indonesia negotiate its interests as a bargaining power with China, but it also adjusts BRI interests to meet domestic needs and geopolitical situations. By applying strategic leverage, Indonesia seeks to pursue its strategic goals, balancing the interplay of materialism and ideational dimensions, using the Maritime Axis narrative as its instrument.

The strategic leverage framework is not merely a generic tool for analyzing middle powers, it is uniquely relevant to Indonesia due to its deep resonance with the nation's foundational foreign policy principle of *bebas-aktif* (free and active). The principle has remained the cornerstone of the country's diplomacy for over seven decades, mandating that Indonesia pursues a foreign policy that is *bebas* (free) from entanglement in the conflicts of great powers and refuses to align with any single power bloc, thereby preserving its independence. Simultaneously, its policy must be *aktif* (active) in contributing to world peace and proactively pursuing its national interests on the global stage. The philosophy of *bebas-aktif* provides the historical and ideological foundation for the behaviors that the strategic leverage framework describes. The principle of *bebas* directly corresponds to the core goal of leverage: to engage with powerful actors without becoming dependent or subject to coercion. It necessitates a constant balancing act, diversifying partnerships and resisting pressures that would compromise sovereignty. The principle of *aktif* mirrors the proactive, agency-driven process of leverage. It compels Indonesia not to be a passive bystander in international affairs but to actively shape its environment, build coalitions, and advance its own vision. Therefore, strategic leverage is not an external theory imposed upon Indonesian foreign policy; rather, it is a theoretical articulation of the *bebas-aktif* principle in practice. This deep-rooted doctrine explains why Indonesia was predisposed not to simply accept or reject the BRI, but to engage it on its own terms, using its assets to actively mold the initiative to fit its long-standing vision.

Shaping the Narrative: Maritime Axis as An Instrument

During his first inauguration as President in 2014, Jokowi emphasized the importance of the past, present, and future of Indonesian civilization. The past describes Indonesia's maritime glory, the present reveals the current situation connected to the sea, and the future describes how Indonesia needs to build its civilization that makes "oceans, seas, straits, and bays" the epicenter of future development.²⁶ The so-called "*jalesveva jayamahe*" - in the sea we are victorious²⁷ - highlights a deep meaning of Indonesia's maritime struggle and sovereignty. Jokowi also emphasized the importance of the sea at the 9th East Asia Summit in Myanmar. The sea is essential for the future prosperity of the nation, representing Indonesia's Maritime Axis to reaffirm maritime identity.²⁸ His emphasis on the Maritime Axis presents Indonesia's ambition to strengthen its strategic position in the Indo-Pacific while also representing a proactive strategic narrative to navigate the influence of great powers, notably China.

The Maritime Axis is deeply rooted in the ancestral heritage for centuries, highlighting the sea as a vital maritime resource and trade route for Indonesia. The Nusantao cultural network built by the Austronesian people in maritime prehistoric times contributed to the development of this route, which expanded to China, India, the Arabian mainland, and Europe.²⁹ The presence of the Srivijaya and Majapahit Kingdoms boosted the glory period of the routes. In the 7th century, Srivijaya emerged as the epicenter of a great maritime civilization,³⁰ dominating maritime commerce along the Malay Peninsula and the Strait of Malacca.³¹ In the 14th century, Majapahit's maritime dominance extended to Southeast Asia that was reinforced by the existence of five maritime trade networks connecting Indonesia with the West and East.³² Although both kingdoms had collapsed, maritime tradition and connectivity with the sea remained rooted in the lives of the Indonesian people. Rooted in the historical maritime tradition, Jokowi has been willing to strengthen Indonesia's maritime identity and reposition its image at the regional and global stage.³³ He interprets the Maritime Axis narrative as a future common project to restore Indonesia's maritime glory. As a common project, Maritime Axis reflects Jokowi's great ambition in his two terms of leadership to improve Indonesia's strategic position and identity in the maritime domain. The project is a strategic goal to shape the nation's future, putting aside personal ambitions for the sake of a big idea.³⁴ In this context, the narrative represents an ancestral heritage and a collective project constructed by the founding fathers and national leaders of Indonesia as a long-term strategic goal, reshaping Indonesia's identity and development

as a maritime nation. As a collective project, the narrative integrates two strategic dimensions: materialism and ideationalism.

Table 1. Strategic Dimensions of the Maritime Axis

Dimension	Focus	Goals
Materialism	Agenda-setting & policy legitimacy	Indonesian Ocean Policy: enhancing maritime connectivity and infrastructure, promoting maritime diplomacy, developing blue economy, maritime security, and sovereignty
	Regional position and power	Sea power, regional leadership: navigating great powers' influence in high-level cooperation
Ideationalism	Characterization	Maritime values, tradition, awareness: unifying the nations connected with the sea
	Self-identity	The struggle of recognition: maritime identity and the global image

Source: Modified by authors based on the Indonesian Ocean Policy

Table 1 presents the foundation and firm reference of maritime understanding, which includes pillars, principles, legal frameworks, and strategies to realize national development physically, which prioritizes Indonesia-centric connectivity.³⁵ Materialism-based objectives emphasize physical development aspects: maritime connectivity and infrastructure, blue economy, sovereignty, and security. This dimension includes repositioning Indonesia in the Indo-Pacific and realizing sea power as a strategy to navigate the influence of great powers. Ideationalism emphasizes non-physical pillars: strengthening maritime national values, traditions, and identities. Although it does not have quantitatively measurable aspects, the ideational dimension

plays a vital role in accelerating Indonesia’s strategic position, particularly navigating China’s influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Indonesia’s Engagement with the BRI: A Case of Strategic Leverage

The Maritime Axis narrative is used as an instrument, assisting the government to manage potential risks posed by the BRI. By actively embracing BRI, Indonesia seeks to leverage the initiative in advancing its own maritime development goals and repositioning its role and image at the international level. In this context, Indonesia navigates its engagement with the BRI through bargaining, resource, and investment leverage.

1. Resource Leverage

As an ideational resource, Indonesia has negotiated favorable terms to ensure that national priorities and the BRI agenda are in line with the Maritime Axis narrative,³⁶ converging key pillars of the Maritime Axis narrative with China’s BRI. The convergence attempts to avoid the intersection of Indonesia and China’s foreign policies,³⁷ which can affect their diplomatic relations.

Table 2. Convergence of Pillars between Maritime Axis and BRI

Level	GMA	BRI
Policy	Promoting high-level cooperation, balancing the role of government and SOEs, and rising maritime policies	Promoting high-quality development as a global systematic project, reestablishing the modern Silk Road, including maritime, economic corridor, and digital realm
National	Enhancing maritime identity, power, and connectivity	National rejuvenation and identity-rising, Chinese Dream, peaceful rise
International	Regional leadership and centrality in Indo-Pacific with ASEAN,	Accelerating international image, accommodating diplomacy, interregional

	soft-revisionist in the maritime realm	connectivity, and a global community with a shared future
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Source: Modified by authors based on the Indonesian Ocean Policy and official documents of BRI

Based on Table 2, the convergence aims to realize common goals through strategic and comprehensive collaborations. The convergence adjusts BRI's priorities, which are focused on Indonesia's maritime development and connectivity at the regional and global levels.³⁸ In addition, the importance of ideational components, such as strengthening maritime identity and image-repositioning, is a top priority of Indonesia's adaptation and negotiation strategy. In this case, the convergence also produces high-level industrial values and maritime collaboration, which can be a role model for other developing countries.³⁹ However, this convergence indeed adapts to the growing interests of Indonesia-China and global needs both materially and ideationally, allowing the two to modify the projected policies.⁴⁰ It includes the instruments and handling methods to achieve the strategic goals.⁴¹ The convergence between the two will strengthen Indonesia's image-repositioning and leadership in the maritime domain, potentially improving the quality of Indonesia's maritime relations with powerful countries.⁴² This mechanism assists Indonesia in strengthening its economic foundation⁴³ and future maritime development. It also allows Indonesia to take control of its engagement with China's BRI, moving away from the debt-trap narrative and the binary framework of acceptance and rejection of the BRI.

On the other hand, Indonesia seeks to play its bargaining power by utilizing its geopolitical position and diversification of strategic partners at the regional level of ASEAN. Indonesia plays an active role in bridging strategic interactions between China and ASEAN countries for the BRI projects.⁴⁴ The government also plays a key role in shaping ASEAN's approach to the BRI, promoting regional maritime cooperation and connectivity. This behavior is demonstrated through several collaborations, such as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the ASEAN Maritime Forum.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, utilizing maritime resources is part of Indonesia's resource leverage. It includes identity-building and image-repositioning at the regional and global stage, leveraging the BRI to realize the Global Maritime Axis, which

China sees as the primary key to strengthening a comprehensive strategic partnership with Indonesia.⁴⁶ The idea of strengthening maritime identity and tradition was reconstructed during Jokowi's administration with an intermestic outlook. Jokowi stated that the restoration of maritime identity and tradition is not solely a jargon, but an ideal, doctrine, and agenda realized through short- and long-term real works.⁴⁷ In this context, the engagement with BRI is a valuable momentum for Indonesia to project its maritime ambitions.⁴⁸

The changing "contours of power"⁴⁹ towards the sea have accelerated political contestation of countries in pursuing the legitimacy of their maritime powers.⁵⁰ This dynamic encourages Jokowi's administration to make the sea as Indonesia's axis of intermestic outlook. Jokowi emphasized that the sea is "the basis of economic growth...to all corners of the archipelago"⁵¹ and "the vanguard and the last fortress"⁵² for Indonesia's maritime power. By leveraging the BRI, the collaborative project of port development, sea toll, and industrial zone becomes a vital project in achieving maritime connectivity and self-development at the global level. World-class ports and marine processing are developed "along the coast, especially those bordering the Strait of Malacca, Batam, Medan, and North Sumatra".⁵³

Of which Kuala Tanjung port is prepared to become a transshipment port in the Malacca Strait with a market share of 5% (Directorate General of Sea Transportation, 2022). With the investment value of 30 trillion rupiah, this port will become an international hub port serving the western region of Indonesia and accommodate cargo to support the development of the Sei Mangkei Special Economic Zone (KEK) and Belawan Port.⁵⁴ In addition, the construction of the sea toll not only reduces dwelling time but also increases the share and performance of sea transportation, which currently only reaches 4%.⁵⁵ This development has gradually shown significant progress, reaching 39 routes in 2023.⁵⁶ The sea toll and port development projects have positive implications for the development of underdeveloped, frontier, outermost, and border regions (3TP), such as reducing price disparities and facilitating the availability of goods.⁵⁷

Although it has been known as a middle-level power, Indonesia needs to move beyond a role enactment as a middle power, repositioning its image and regional leadership. It indicates its political stance as a soft-revisionist, justifying its position to a greater involvement in the maritime domain and its image as a world maritime axis country.⁵⁸ By leveraging the BRI, Indonesia seeks to become

a “lighthouse”⁵⁹ which expands regional connectivity.⁶⁰ It will also be realized through the concept of blue partnership between Indonesia and China.⁶¹ This partnership will strengthen Indonesia's image-repositioning and leadership in the maritime sector at the regional stage, providing opportunities for improving the quality of Indonesia's maritime relations with major countries⁶² in the Indo-Pacific.

2. Bargaining and Investment Leverage

Indonesia offers strategic ideas synergized with the BRI, including infrastructure development, investment, and the growth of science and technology in the maritime domain through MoU and relevant agreements. The country has proposed building a high-speed rail project since 2008⁶³ as a goal to improve the “state of the art technology of national railways”.⁶⁴ The idea was transformed into a prototype of the “Merah-Putih” fast train, with the Jakarta-Surabaya route⁶⁵ included in the vision and mission document⁶⁶ and National Strategic Projects (PSN).⁶⁷ The BRI presents potential to accelerate the project development by negotiating funding and collaboration through PT Kereta Cepat Indonesia China (KCIC) consortium scheme, relying on the B-to-B system between PT Pilar Sinergi BUMN Indonesia (PSBI) and Beijing Yawan HSR Co. Ltd.⁶⁸

The rejection of the government's G2G scheme is part of Indonesia's bargaining to maintain a balance between its national interests and foreign policy while minimizing the risk of Chinese dominance in the country. In this context, Indonesia seeks to enhance the role of SOEs or business-to-business (B-to-B) and public-private partnership schemes.⁶⁹ The B-to-B scheme has a strategic role in running collaborative projects of Jokowi and BRI under commercial supervision, without any political ties and heavily relying on the government's spending or the so-called state revenue and expenditure budget (APBN).⁷⁰ This scheme is a key consideration for the government to control financing and negotiate profit sharing between countries.

Indonesia has proactively managed its engagement with China's BRI by maintaining the balance between the role and “sustainable business” of the government and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs).⁷¹ This process is part of integration with “a strong fencing”⁷² towards national interests to avoid excessive dependence and the dilemma of insecurity over China's influence in Indonesia. The government seeks to avoid politicizing BRI by increasing the role of state-owned enterprises and expanding its partnership with China to diversify

strategic partners. These efforts reflect the country's decision to embrace BRI in a wait-and-see position, synergizing national priorities and foreign policy.

In 30 collaborative projects worth US\$91.1 billion, SOEs have become the leading partners in projecting regional development corridors in Indonesia, where North Sumatra, North Kalimantan, North Sulawesi, and Bali are the four main development areas.⁷³ These corridors play central roles in connecting a well-balanced distribution of ship traffic and economic growth between Java and non-Java regions.⁷⁴ Indonesia, through BUMN, negotiated a 60% shareholding and China shares 40% in the KCIC consortium project, even though China Development Bank provides 75% of the loan.⁷⁵ This shareholding indicates that Indonesia has been actively negotiating the role and control mechanisms of the engagement to reduce the risk of insecurity for Indonesia's strategic autonomy and national identity.

National ownership is essential to develop domestic capacity and significant benefits for Indonesian society, including technology and knowledge transfer.⁷⁶ The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway (KCJB) or Whoosh project increases the region's development as a multifunctional activity center and advances integrated public transportation, especially in West Java.⁷⁷ The development was carried out through a collaborative project between KCIC and PT Summarecon Agung Tbk, for example, at Tegalluar Station.⁷⁸ It impacts local communities with easy access to public transportation. It indicates the increasing number of passengers from 14.000 to 24.000 people per day,⁷⁹ of which 48% are private car users.⁸⁰ The project also provides added value for the tourism industry and the local economy, such as the demand for tourist accommodation and special space for promoting Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).⁸¹ However, the most important benchmark for empowering local communities is the contribution of knowledge and technology transfer, especially digitalization from China to Indonesia, which has been implemented in the high-speed rail project.⁸²

Whoosh is the first high-speed train project to support the achievement of "global maritime hub".⁸³ Initially, Indonesia attempted to realize the idea by collaborating with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).⁸⁴ However, political and funding consideration⁸⁵ becomes the government's concern to cooperate with China in comparison to Japan. Nevertheless, Indonesia considers Japan's involvement in future projects. This behavior illustrates that Indonesia has considered both offers, leading to bargaining and

investment leverage by choosing a partner that offers beneficial funding to the country. In other words, Indonesia cannot be categorized solely as a recipient or rejector of BRI, as stated by Colley and Noort. By utilizing the dynamics of Japanese and Chinese funding competition, Indonesia takes a wait-and-see position in synergizing its priorities. If a threat of insecurity arises, Indonesia can manage its relationship with China without confronting it. In this case, Indonesia positions itself to choose the best offer, without entirely relying on BRI acceptance.

Concluding Remarks

This study has analyzed Indonesia's engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative, arguing that it is better understood as a proactive, bottom-up process of strategic leverage. By moving beyond the logic of hedging and buy-in framework, this study reveals a nuanced model of middle power agency. Indonesia has not been a passive recipient of a great power's agenda but an active agent that has successfully co-opted the BRI to serve its own pre-existing national vision, the Global Maritime Axis. In resource leverage, Indonesia uses geo-maritime position, the diversification of strategic partners at the ASEAN regional level, and the Maritime Axis narrative as an ideational resource by converging the pillars of the Maritime Axis and the BRI. While in bargaining and investment leverage, Indonesia has offered strategic ideas, including KCJB, by prioritizing the B-to-B compared to G2G share ownership.

This study offers three key contributions to the field of international relations. First, it provides an empirically grounded alternative to top-down analytical frameworks, highlighting the agency of middle powers in shaping their engagement with great power initiatives through strategic narratives. Second, it operationalizes the concept of strategic leverage by identifying three distinct and observable forms—resource, bargaining, and investment—creating a replicable methodology for analyzing statecraft. Third, it underscores the critical interplay between ideational power and material interests, demonstrating that a compelling national narrative can be as potent a source of leverage as geographic position or economic scale.

The Indonesian case provides a central lesson that proactivity is essential. By developing and articulating a strong national vision before entering major negotiations, a state can define its priorities, set its own terms, and transform the dynamic from one of potential dependency to one of partnership. For Indonesian policymakers, this study affirms the success of their current strategy

and underscores the GMA narrative as an indispensable tool for maintaining autonomy in an increasingly competitive geopolitical landscape. Further research could apply this framework to security dynamics. For instance, to examine how Indonesia applies strategic leverage in navigating the complex security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, particularly in relation to China-U.S. competition in the South China Sea.

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³ (Bannati Khairani, Diah Nur Khafivah 2019; Artha Yudilla 2019; Yuliantoro 2019; Oratmangun 2022)

⁴ (Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Strategy for State Documents & Translation 2023; Duqiang 2023)

⁵ (Antara 2024; Duqiang 2023)

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- ⁹ (Yeremia 2021, 327)
- ¹⁰ (Mursitama and Ying 2021; Soong 2021, 7; Saha and Pant 2021, 42)
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- ¹² (Subotić 2016; Colley and Noort 2022b; Ba 2019; Ashbee 2020; Atkins et al. 2023; Fulton 2020; Miskimmon et al. 2020; Van Noort and Colley 2021)
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- ¹⁵
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- ³⁴ (B. R. O. Anderson 2014, 3)
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- ⁶² (Wulandari 2024, 57)
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