

Sentiment Analysis of Public Opinion in Indonesia on China's Belt Road Initiative

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Abstract

This research examines the growing public opinion in Indonesia about China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. The data source used is Twitter, with content analysis as the research method. Twitter data from January 2016 to September 2021 is limited to the Indonesian language and Indonesian territory. From the results of data mining using Python with search keywords: "Chinese foreign workers," "China OBOR project," "China investment," "China infrastructure," and "China debt," there are 37,149 tweets. Sentiment analysis shows the number of positive tweets is 8,119 or 21.86%, Neutral 4,766 or 12.83%, and negative 24,264 tweets or 65.32%. The analysis identifies three main reasons for the predominantly negative sentiment. First, government communication and its support groups were weak: the narrative and issues built around the BRI project lacked focus, giving an impression of poor coordination. Second, opposition groups were unified and mutually supportive, allowing them to dominate the narrative on social media. Third, because Indonesia adheres to a democratic system, threatening, intimidating, or repressing critics of the BRI project is counterproductive and should be avoided. More in-depth research needs to be done using other social media data sources and different research methods to gain a deeper and more thorough understanding of the public opinion that develops in Indonesia regarding the BRI project.

Keywords: Sentiment analysis, Twitter, Belt Road Initiative, Indonesia, Public opinion

INTRODUCTION

The internet's connectivity and convergence have made it a central infrastructure for social activism, enabling relationships, experiences, and collective action to form and shift rapidly. As a result, social activism occurring in one part of the world can quickly be observed and mobilized elsewhere. (Lim, 2005). More interestingly, the internet also presents a social media platform so that the relationship of Communication and personal intimacy is present in the public space. Such as Facebook and Twitter, which can present public information that does not exist in mainstream media. (Ritonga & Syahputra, 2019). Information in remote villages far from the city is now easily viral because of social media. On the one hand, it does provide an alternative to citizen journalism and provides opportunities for increased public participation.

Social media has become a significant arena for the political-economic contestation of media. Twitter appeared in 2006 and is widely used for political debate, crisis communication, marketing, and cultural participation. The Arab Spring is one example of social media shaping public opinion in a political context, driving a process of democratization in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Libya; a similar dynamic has occurred in Indonesia. Public opinion frequently develops based on trending topics on Twitter, and Twitter has even become a battleground for each candidate in general election contests. (Muqsith et al., 2019). Twitter and Facebook are effective and efficient channels for promotion. Both business and political campaigns benefit from their speed, interactivity, and wide distribution, and the public can freely comment on, rate, and express opinions about various topics. (Wulandari et al., 2019).

The digital world is leading civilization towards the post-truth era. In an era where information is scattered in large quantities, and anyone can be a source of information, the truth becomes absurd. It requires the active role of journalists to guide information on social media towards objectivity and honesty. It is expected to form cyberculture that is complementary between public participation and the objectivity of information. In the end, a society with a new civilization is formed. (Ritonga & Syahputra, 2019).

Social processes unfold through individuals' actions and interactions, as individuals continuously construct a reality that is experienced and shared objectively; the social facts depicted by the media operate in the same way. (Dharma, 2018).

The development of the Belt Road Initiative has led to a growing number of infrastructure projects carried out by Chinese companies as engineering contractors in Indonesia. However, Chinese companies face many challenges, including the specific characteristics of project contracts, political changes in Indonesia, currency exchange rates, permits, land acquisition, administrative efficiency, cultural differences, and negative sentiments held by some Indonesians for historical reasons. These challenges require Chinese companies to work harder to ensure each project runs smoothly and according to contract. (邹红霞, 宋净飞, 2019). In addition to choosing the right policy, looking at the condition of public opinion of the BRI project participating countries that developed on social media, it is necessary to create a rival public opinion to offset negative sentiments. (张鹏, 邹汶君, 兰月新, 夏一雪, 2019). Building a positive image of the Chinese state in

carrying out the BRI project is therefore essential. This approach relies not only on policymakers but also targets the broader community, because in a democracy, public opinion is typically used as a basis for strategic policymaking.

This study examines Indonesian public opinion sentiment regarding the BRI China project against the various backgrounds outlined above. Twitter was chosen not only because of its popularity as a social media platform but also because of its capacity to influence public policy. The aim of this research is to examine the public opinion developing in Indonesia and assess whether it continues to serve as the basis for policymaking.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, while most prior sentiment-analysis research on the BRI has focused on China, Pakistan, or Turkey, this study provides an empirical account of Indonesian public opinion specifically, a democracy in which public discourse plays a direct role in policymaking. Second, it combines large-scale Twitter sentiment analysis (37,149 tweets, January 2016 to September 2021) with qualitative content analysis of specific accounts, hashtags, and narratives, offering a more contextualized reading than sentiment percentages alone. Third, it identifies communication gaps between pro-government and opposition narratives that help explain why negative sentiment dominates, providing an empirical basis for BRI-related public communication strategy in Indonesia.

Based on the background above, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What is the overall sentiment (positive, neutral, negative) of Indonesian public opinion on Twitter toward the BRI project, and how does it vary across the five keyword themes (Chinese foreign workers, the OBOR project, Chinese investment, Chinese infrastructure, and China's debt)? (2) What substantive issues and narratives dominate Indonesian public discourse on the BRI project on Twitter? (3) What communication dynamics between pro-government and opposition actors help explain the observed sentiment pattern?

Accordingly, the objective of this research is to examine the public opinion developing in Indonesia regarding the BRI project as expressed on Twitter, and to assess the extent to which that opinion functions as a basis for policymaking within Indonesia's democratic system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have examined public opinion on the BRI project using social media sentiment analysis, employing a range of approaches and analytical frameworks. Among them is research using China's social media database, Weibo. A search using the keyword “一带一路” (Belt and Road) generated 302,335 messages, with sentiment analysis showing 55.15% positive, 24.74% neutral, and 20.11% negative. Research on social media was subsequently expanded to include Weibo, blogs, WeChat, news aggregators, and 25 news websites with the keyword “一带一路” (Belt and Road). From June 1 to July 1, 2017, there were 628,858 messages, while the keyword "belt and road" contained 3,935. Overall positive sentiment is 56%, neutral 26%, and negative 12%. Xinhua News, People's Daily, CRI, Global Times, Caixin Global, Yicai Global, and ICS Shanghai Live actively share their tweets. (Nie, 2019). A similar pattern emerges in Fan Liang's research,

which examined coverage of the BRI by China's official media on Facebook, including CGTN, CGTN America, CGTN Africa, People's Daily, Global Times, China Daily, and Xinhua News Agency, comprising 43,239 news stories during September 2013. The findings show that Chinese media constructed a framework and narrative distinct from those of other countries, tending toward soft news that highlighted the positive impact of the BRI project. (Liang, 2019).

Research conducted by Abbasi et al. analyzed 20,727 tweets on Twitter using the keywords #BeltandRoad and #BRF2019, finding 23% excellent, 21% good, 46% neutral, 8% poor, and 2% terrible sentiment. Chinese state media, such as China Daily, CGTN, CRI, and Xinhua News, appeared at the top of the rankings in posting volume. Notably, official accounts of the Pakistani government, China's envoy to the European Union, the President of Serbia, and Pakistan's prime minister were also actively tweeting. (Abbasi et al., 2021).

Another study of Weibo using the keywords "One Belt One Road" and "OBOR" from January 1 to December 2017 identified 360,000 messages, compared with 63,907 tweets on Twitter over the same period. Geographically, America and Canada accounted for 18% of the tweets, Jakarta in Indonesia for 8%, Malaysia and West Asia for 4%, and Beijing for 4%. Negative sentiment values highlighted security concerns, while positive sentiment was more closely tied to economic issues. (赵常煜 & 吴亚平, 2019).

From April 16 to May 31, 2017, the Chinese embassy tweeted 304 times, accounting for 34% of its total tweets over the preceding two years, with most tweets focused on promoting the BRI project. Of these, 195 tweets were positive, 40 were neutral, and 21 were negative. The most frequently occurring words included: cooperation (positive, 139); encouragement (positive, 22); great (positive, 21); benefits (positive, 17); support (positive, 15); center (neutral, 15); benefits (positive, 14); important (positive, 13); lock (neutral, 11); open (positive, 11); relationship (neutral, 10). (Arifon et al., 2019). A Twitter analysis from January to June 2015 using the keyword "#CPEC" found 11,837 tweets in English and 815 in other languages. Positive sentiment reached 56% and was mostly carried out by @PlanComPakistan, the Twitter account of Pakistan's Ministry of Planning, Development, and Reform. Of the 117 ministry tweets, 60 were positive tweets, 40 were neutral and shared information about CPEC, and 17 were negative. Few negative tweets come from Pakistani opposition circles. While neutral tweets come from new agencies and channels in Pakistan and China, such as @dlXinjiang and @CapitalTV_News. (Ahmed et al., 2019).

Another study in Pakistan analyzed Twitter data from April 24 and April 28, 2019, using the keywords #BRI2019, #CPEC, China Pakistan Economic Corridor, #BRI, Belt & Road Initiative, and #BRIForum. Selected accounts, including journalists, media outlets, think tanks, business or international relations experts, state agencies, diplomats, politicians, political parties, and trade outlets, were analyzed for thematic content. The results show that the growing public opinion recognizes the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as a positive project. (ZAIN et al., 2020)

Chandra et al. approached Twitter data from a different analytical angle, identifying several dominant word clusters: general-nature issues such as "VeChain," a

platform supporting the BRI; economic issues such as trade, investment, infrastructure, and debt; environmental issues such as energy and sustainable development; and security-related issues such as war, territorial control, power, and oppression. (Chandra et al., 2020). A study of three Twitter accounts run by Chinese state media, namely CGTN, People's Daily, and Xinhua News, found that their posting strategy focused on highlighting the achievements of the Chinese state. Tweets about China generally received a large number of positive responses, whereas tweets about its leadership received comparatively few. (Nip & Sun, 2018).

Twitter sentiment analysis has also been conducted in Turkey, covering the period from 2013 to 2017. The findings show that Turkish public opinion was similarly divided into two groups: supporters and critics of the BRI project. Supporters, primarily aligned with the ruling party led by President Erdoğan, view the BRI project as valuable for accelerating economic growth and restoring Turkey's historical prominence reminiscent of Ottoman rule. Critics, generally from opposition groups, question China's intentions behind the BRI project, viewing it as a hidden agenda aimed at hegemony and the assertion of Chinese authority over other countries as China seeks to influence international geopolitics. (Akçay & Qingye, 2020).

Sentiment analysis on social media across various countries shows mixed results: some view the BRI positively, some neutrally, and some negatively. Pessimistic views tend to be grounded in media narratives about debt traps, project quality, security, and global geopolitics, while optimistic views are grounded in expectations of future economic development through transportation, digital, and maritime connectivity. Overall, the literature reviewed above shows that countries with different governmental systems have developed varying opinions regarding the BRI project, with Western countries appearing more negative and Asian and African countries appearing more positive. In this context, it is also important to examine Indonesia's perspective on the project.

Taken together, the studies reviewed above share a common limitation: most report sentiment distributions and dominant themes descriptively, without situating findings within a communication-theoretical framework. Two concepts are useful for interpreting the patterns above. First, agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) helps explain why certain BRI-related issues (debt, sovereignty, foreign labor) become salient in public discourse: the volume and repetition of an issue on social media can elevate its perceived importance regardless of its factual weight. Second, framing theory is relevant to how the same event, such as the AidData hidden-debt report, is framed by different actors as either a fiscal irregularity or evidence of a "debt trap," producing divergent sentiment outcomes from the same underlying fact. A third relevant concept is the digital public sphere, which frames Twitter as a contested arena where pro-government and opposition actors compete to set the dominant narrative, rather than a neutral space of deliberation. These three concepts (agenda-setting, framing, and the digital public sphere) are used in this study as an interpretive lens for the sentiment and thematic findings reported below, addressing the gap in the literature toward a more analytically grounded, rather than purely descriptive, treatment of BRI-related public opinion.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative sentiment analysis with qualitative content analysis, an approach consistent with computational social science research on social media discourse. The quantitative component classifies the polarity (positive, neutral, negative) of a large volume of tweets, while the qualitative component contextualizes those results by examining specific accounts, hashtags, and narratives. This combination is justified because sentiment percentages alone cannot explain why a particular pattern emerges; qualitative content analysis is needed to identify the actors and narratives driving it. The data source for this study is Twitter, the social media platform most widely used in Indonesia for public discourse. Tweets analyzed in this study come predominantly from influencers who have substantial followings and the capacity to shape public discourse and social reality. The data was taken from January 2016 to September 2021.

The steps of the data collection process on Twitter can be explained as follows:

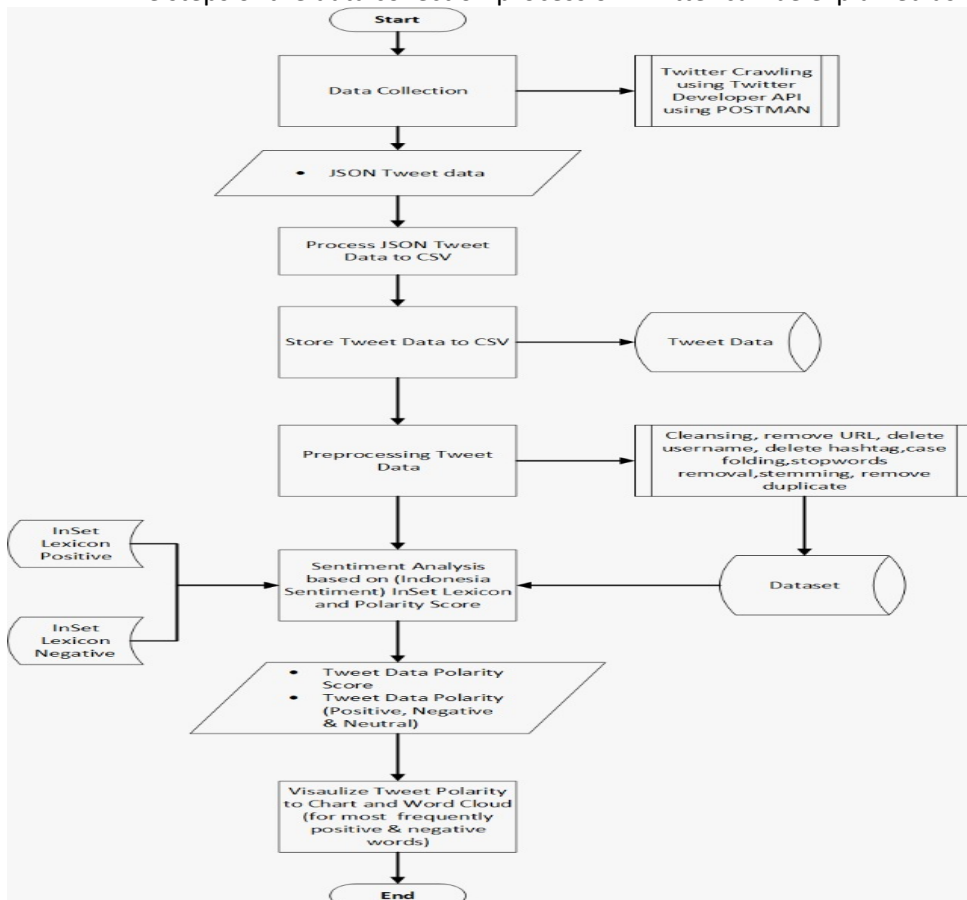


Figure 1 : data retrieval flow on twitter social media

The data analyzed for sentiment (positive, negative, or neutral) was sourced from the Twitter data crawling process described below. The keywords used in this process are as follows: 1) China OBOR Project, 2) Chinese Foreign Workers (TKA), 3) Chinese Infrastructure, 4) Chinese Investment, and 5) China's Debt. The data taken are comments

and posts from Twitter from January 2016 to September 2021 based on the 5 (five) keywords above.

These five keywords were selected because they recurred as the most frequently discussed BRI-related themes in preliminary observation of Indonesian Twitter discourse and in the issues most commonly reported by Indonesian mass media covering the BRI project (foreign labor, the flagship OBOR/high-speed rail project, infrastructure development, investment, and debt). Together they were judged to capture the principal economic, labor, and fiscal dimensions of Indonesian public discourse on the BRI, though the authors acknowledge that other keywords (e.g., specific project names, environmental terms) could have captured additional facets of the discourse and represent a direction for future research.

Crawling Twitter data from January 2016 to September 2021 requires a Twitter Academic Developer account, which can be registered via <https://developer.twitter.com/en/portal/dashboard>. Once the registration is approved, Twitter issues Application Programming Interface (API) Keys, an API Key Secret, an Access Token, an Access Token Secret, and a Bearer Token. The data crawling process is then carried out using the POSTMAN application, with these API parameters entered alongside the target keywords and date range for the search. The process of crawling Twitter data using POSTMAN is shown in Figure 2.

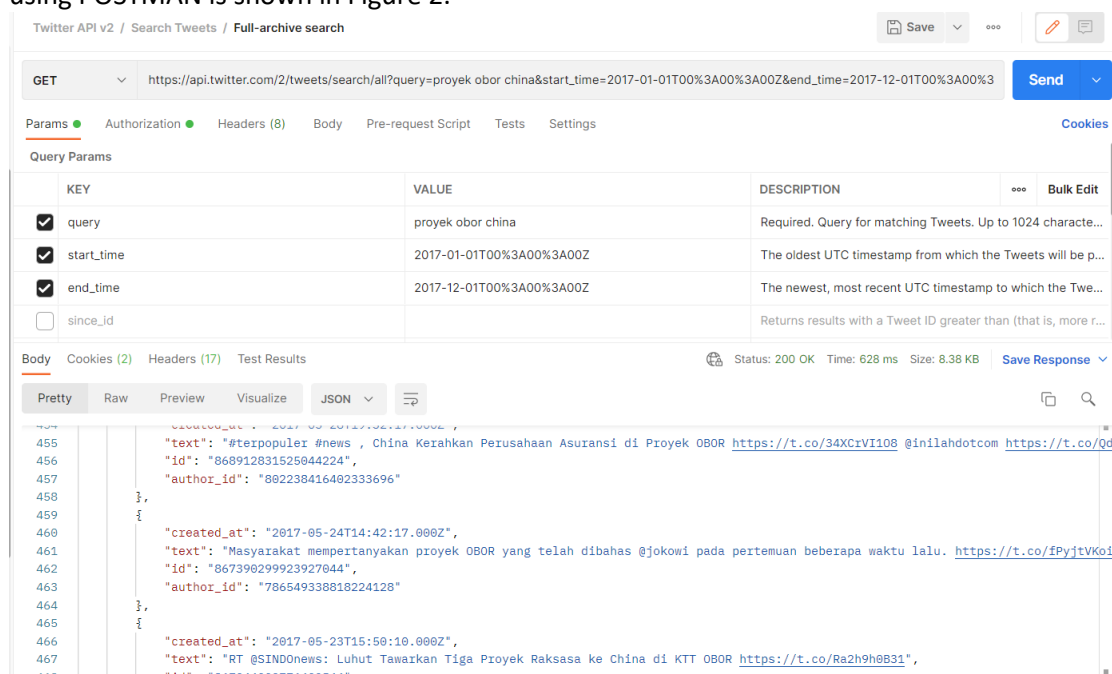


Figure 2. The Data Crawling Process Using the POSTMAN Application

Figure 2 shows the data crawling process using the POSTMAN application. Search keywords are entered through the query field, while the date range is specified through the `start_time` and `end_time` fields. Because Twitter allows a maximum of 500 posts per crawling request, each request was limited to a one- or two-month window to obtain optimal results.

Collected Twitter data is stored in JavaScript Object Notation (JSON) format. To facilitate sentiment analysis, this data is converted into Comma Separated Values (CSV) format using an application developed in Python. The Python syntax used for this conversion is shown in Figure 3.

```
import pandas as pd
from pandas.io.json import json_normalize
import json

with open('') as project_file:
    data = json.load(project_file)

df = pd.json_normalize(data)
df.head()

# load data using Python JSON module
with open('') as f:
    data = json.loads(f.read())
# Flatten data
df_nested_list = pd.json_normalize(data, record_path=['data'])
df_nested_list.head(100)

df_nested_list.to_csv('')
```

Figure 3. JSON to CSV Conversion Syntax

The next step is pre-processing the Twitter data, a crucial stage in which unnecessary words and symbols are removed from each tweet.

After the cleaned Twitter data is obtained, the next step is to classify the sentiment of each tweet. Sentiment classification uses a polarity approach to generate positive, negative, and neutral labels. This study performs sentiment classification using the Indonesian Sentiment Lexicon. (Rahmaningtyas, 2017). Lexicon Indonesian Sentiment, or InSet Lexicon, consists of 3,609 positive words and 6,609 negative words, with scores ranging from -5 to +5, where -5 indicates very negative sentiment polarity and +5 indicates very positive sentiment.

As a lexicon-based tool, InSet has well-documented limitations that are particularly relevant to Twitter data. It scores words individually against a fixed dictionary and therefore has difficulty correctly classifying sarcasm, irony, and rhetorical questions, all of which are common in Indonesian political discourse. It also has limited capacity to handle code-switching between Indonesian and English or regional languages, and informal or non-standard Indonesian spellings and slang, which are typical of Twitter language. Consequently, tweets whose sentiment depends on context, tone, or implication beyond individual word polarity, rather than word choice alone, may be misclassified. This limitation is acknowledged as a boundary condition on the precision of the automated sentiment scores reported below; the accompanying qualitative content analysis is intended, in part, to cross-check and contextualize borderline cases.

In addition to sentiment classification, this study conducts a social network analysis (SNA) of accounts engaging with BRI-related keywords to identify the most influential accounts driving criticism of the government and the structure of interaction among them (retweets and mentions). Influential accounts were identified based on centrality within the retweet/mention network and follower count, and are visualized in Figures 6 and 7. This SNA component is exploratory and descriptive in nature, intended to complement the sentiment and content analysis by identifying which actors most shape the observed narrative, rather than to test a formal hypothesis about network structure.

This study uses only publicly available tweets, consistent with Twitter's terms of service for research use of public data at the time of collection, and no private or restricted data were accessed. Because the study analyzes and, in places, quotes tweets from identifiable public accounts (including public officials, journalists, and political figures posting in a public

capacity), account handles are retained where the account belongs to a public figure or institutional actor whose public statements are inherently part of public discourse. No attempt was made to identify or de-anonymize private individuals, and no personal data beyond what the account holder made publicly visible on Twitter was collected or reported. The final step visualizes the average sentiment results from the dataset as a pie chart, generated using the matplotlib library. In addition, the WordCloud library is used to display words that frequently appear in the dataset and phrases that commonly occur in negative and positive tweets.

RESULTS

Twitter data from January 2016 to September 2021 is limited to only the Indonesian language and Indonesian territory. From the results of data mining using Python with search keywords: "Chinese foreign workers," "China OBOR project," "China investment," "China infrastructure," and "China debt," there are 37,149 tweets. As shown in Figure 4, sentiment analysis reveals 8,119 positive tweets (21.86%), 4,766 neutral tweets (12.83%), and 24,264 negative tweets (65.32%).

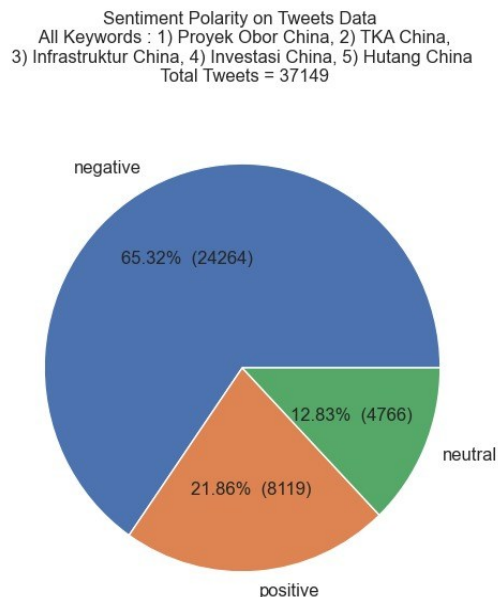


Figure 4: sentiment analysis with all keywords

The analysis above can be broken down by keyword. The keyword "Chinese Foreign Workers" (TKA) totaled 5,914 tweets, comprising 60.64% negative, 23.13% positive, and 16.23% neutral sentiment. Sentiment polarization with the keyword "China infrastructure" contained 8,502 tweets, 60.52% negative, 19.91% neutral, and 19.57% positive. Sentiment polarization with the keyword "China investment" was 13,609 tweets, 53.89% negative, 32.63% positive, and 13.48% neutral. Sentiment polarization with the keyword "China OBOR project" had 683 tweets, 61.20% negative, 27.53% positive, and 11.27% neutral. The keyword "China's debt," with 8,441 tweets, has a polarization of 92.18% negative, 5.43% positive, and 2.39% neutral.

is driven in part by Habib Rizieq Shihab (HRS), regarded by this group as its leader. HRS does not have a social media account, but he remains a key opposition figure among Muslims, and his passionate following, reaching millions of people, forms the main group of narrative builders opposing the government. Other figures and groups have also criticized the BRI project beyond HRS's followers. Personal accounts that frequently criticize the Jokowi government include @hnurwahid, @fadlizon, @fahrihamzah, @msaid_didu, @Rockygerung, @rachlannashidik, @syahganda, @jumhurhidayat, @Andiarief_, @NataliusPigai2, @musniumar, and @TofaTofa_id. Accounts using pseudonyms include @OppositeCerdas, @democrazymedia, @maspiyuaja, @muslimcyberarmy, @Opposite6890, @do_ta_dong, @podoradong, @kafiradikal, @kafiradikalis, and @geloraco, among others. Ahead of the 2019 presidential election, the @Rockygerung account, which has more than 1.8 million followers, was suspended by the government for allegedly influencing public opinion; the @ustadtengkuzul account was subsequently suspended following the death of its owner.

Second, active pro-government accounts on Twitter include @hendrisubiyakto, @mohmahfoedmd, @addiems, @fajroelrahman, @budimanjatmiko, @TsamaraDKI, @savicali, @zuhairimisrawi, @AntoniRaja, and @grace_net. However, the issues these accounts raised on Twitter did not focus on the BRI project, and some did not mention it at all. The @mohmahfoedmd account belongs to the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs and has 3.7 million followers. The @addiems account belongs to a musician who is a vocal supporter of President Joko Widodo, with a fan base of 2.5 million people. Accounts using pseudonyms include @partaisocmed, @jasmev, @Ar07Pangeran, @Ar01Pangeran, @kurawa, @Candraasmara, and @_LOVE_AG4EVER. Several accounts formerly supported Jokowi but have since turned against him, such as the @partaisocmed account.

Third, several accounts belong to former Joko Widodo campaign volunteers, including @ekokuntadhi, @dennysiregar7, @FerdinanHaen3, @adearmando, @PartaiSocmed, @GunRomli, and @abujanda. These accounts are widely regarded as government buzzers, known as "BuzzeRp," a satirical label in which "Rp" (the symbol for Indonesian rupiah) implies that the account holders are paid influencers. The Ministry of Communication and Information suspended the @adearmando and @abujanda accounts after they were found to have repeatedly spread hoaxes, provocative content, slander, and hate speech. The "BuzzeRp" label attached to these accounts has reinforced opposition groups' resolve to attack and undermine the government's infrastructure projects.

The keyword "China's debt" produced the highest level of negative sentiment (92.18%), peaking in tweet volume during 2021. This was primarily triggered by the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project, which became a recurring topic in television and newspaper coverage after its budget swelled to 27 trillion rupiah, forcing the Indonesian government to draw on state budget (APBN) funds despite its earlier commitment not to do so. Many in the public consider this use of APBN funds, amid the economic pressures of the pandemic, to be an unnecessary burden, arguing that the funds would be better spent on subsidies for those in need, such as grants for education, health, or small business

assistance. Public opinion largely attributes the budget overrun to poor planning by the Indonesian government, making it a recurring target of opposition criticism.

Jokowi's presidential victories in two general elections were substantially driven by volunteers motivated by a desire for change, who financed their own campaign events and raised funds in his support. However, many members of these volunteer groups later proved pragmatic and power-seeking: several publicly claimed to have been instrumental in Jokowi's victory and sought government positions in return, a dynamic that caused divisions among volunteers supporting the government. As a result, when criticism of President Jokowi's BRI-related policies mounted, many of these volunteers responded with indifference, disappointed at not having been rewarded with a position, and were no longer willing to mobilize the social media networks originally built to campaign for Jokowi. This dynamic is illustrated by the social network analysis in Figure 6 below.

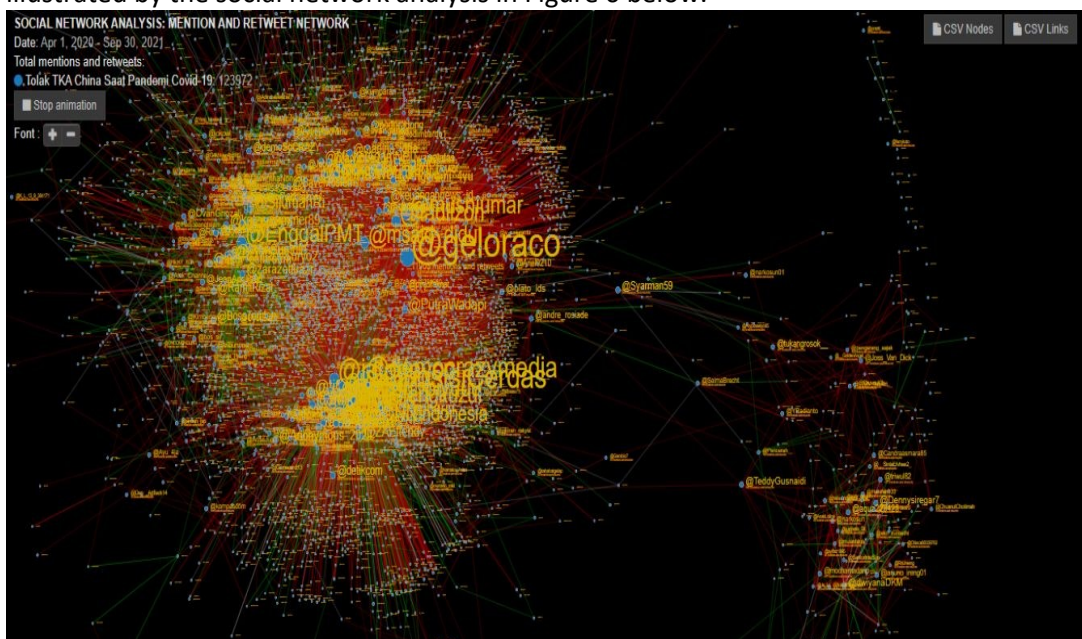


Figure 6: a social network analysis of accounts criticizing the government about the BRI project.

On the other hand, government accounts and state officials popular on social media tend to be silent, not responding. It can be seen from Figure 6 and Figure 7. Only statements @_ekokuntadhi, @dennysiregar7, and @FerdinanHaen3, were reviewed but received no response from other pro-government groups. This absence of response is notable given the volume of criticism directed at these accounts. Accounts such as presidential spokespersons @fajroelrahman and @AliNgabalinNew instead discuss other issues that emerged around the same time, such as criticism of the police.

On the other hand, the ministers are also busy with issues that develop in public, such as the bankrupt national airline Garuda Indonesia, the stalled Kertajati and Sudirman airport projects, ministerial officials who were highlighted for the Covid-19 PCR test and vaccine business. Add to that the public backlash generated by several ministers' controversial public statements, such as remarks perceived as dismissive of the severity of Covid-19. The Minister of Religious Affairs also stated that religious faith is a blessing reserved

for specific groups, a remark that drew public criticism. These controversies collectively diverted the government and its supporters from countering the opposition's narrative, even though the opposition's accounts, including automated or coordinated (bot) accounts, remained highly active and consistently focused on building their case.

Opposition groups, meanwhile, are highly active in their criticism. As shown in Figure 7, the top five influencers criticizing the Indonesian government on the China BRI project are @geloraco, @OppositionCerdas, @democrazymedia, @fadlizon, and @msaid_didu. The @fadlizon account alone has 1.7 million followers, making it a significant force in shaping public opinion on social media.

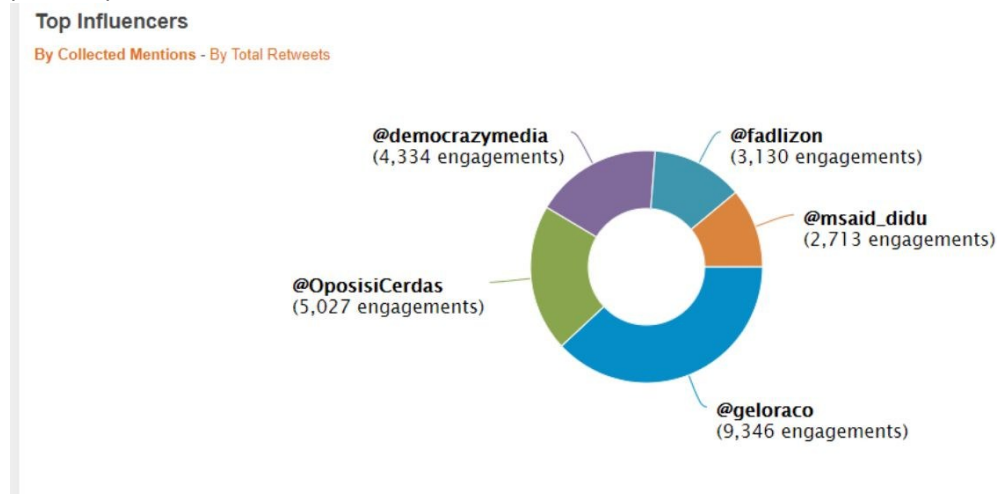


Figure 7: 5 top influencers in criticizing the BRI China project in Indonesia

The narrative surrounding the BRI China project in Indonesia includes several hashtags, as shown in Figure 8. The most popular are #Menagrasakomunis, #TempoNasional, #Nalar, #Decreasebefore2024, #utangchina, #Tiongkonbikinjongkok, #Indochina, and #TKAChina. In general, these hashtags do not focus on criticizing China's policies in Indonesia but instead target the Indonesian government's policies, forming a narrative aimed at bringing down Jokowi's government before the end of his term in 2024. They are also linked to criticism of the government's reasoning as inconsistent with democratic principles and economic strengthening. #TempoNasional became a popular hashtag partly because Tempo received substantial criticism during Jokowi's second term and is frequently cited as a reference by netizens, despite having supported Jokowi's government during the 2014-2019 period.

(tadpoles) and Prabowo's supporters as "bats" (*kampret*). Other names include *Aseng* (used to refer to groups perceived as supporting foreign investment) and *kafir*, *kadrun* (desert lizard, short for *kadal gurun*). Both sides use social media, including hashtags, as a medium for political battles, with the side that dominates the discourse effectively prevailing in the contest for public opinion. (Fadillah, Dani; Lin, 2019).

The polarization from the 2019 presidential election has undoubtedly carried over into discussions of the BRI project, which was already underway at that time. The narratives built by opposition groups largely mirror those propagated in the West, including the issues of debt traps, South China Sea security and stability, the threat of Chinese hegemony, poor project quality, environmental concerns, and religious sentiment surrounding the Xinjiang Muslim issue, compounded by issues raised specifically by Indonesian opposition groups, such as illegal labor and violations of residency permits. Several key issues shaping public opinion on the BRI project in Indonesia include the following:

1) Environment

Several media highlighted the ecological impact of the BRI project. According to The Washington Post, many Latin American countries have criticized China's BRI project policies on the environment for not doing enough to protect water supplies. Such media coverage expresses hope that China will play a greater role in addressing global climate change in the future. (Yu & Yan, 2020, pp. 72–78). China could play a more significant role in raising public awareness of environmental protection and related economic and social issues, helping the public understand that the BRI project is not solely a means of strengthening the country's economy and society but also carries social and ecological dimensions worth attention. Foregrounding these ecological issues within the BRI project could also help counter the Western narrative that focuses primarily on political and security concerns. (Hu, 2019, pp. 615–623).

In Indonesia, some public opinion has also highlighted concerns that China's projects will significantly damage the environment, driven by the large number of mining and energy plants developed in cooperation with China. In addition, infrastructure projects such as road construction have contributed to deforestation. This is illustrated by several tweets below:

#99@PartaiSocmed "So what can we get from the Chinese investment? No profits, no jobs. Can you only damage the environment and the covid?" (<https://mobile.twitter.com/partaisocmed/status/1424306046659567621>)

@dadanghrs, on May 9, 2019, tweeted, "KPK reminds SOEs to be careful regarding investments from China. According to him, China does not have good environmental standards, human rights, and good corporate governance. Link: KPK Reminds SOEs to Be Careful in Accepting Investments from China <http://detik.id/6vKBKL>". Got 111 retweets and 141 likes. (<https://twitter.com/dadanghrs/status/1126375152764145664>)

WALHI JABAR (@walhijabar), a Twitter account belonging to an environmental NGO, tweeted on September 13, 2019: "Said @kemaritiman, China is environmentally

friendly technology. Obey investment rules. The fact is that the KCIC project's Grider factory is not licensed at KBB. This is the latest.

<http://rmoljabar.com/read/2019/09/10/105088/Proyek-Kereta-Cepat-Cemari-DAS-Citarum->
(<https://mobile.twitter.com/walhijabar/status/1172209881807327232>)

However, others view Chinese investment in Indonesia as unlikely to harm the environment:

Daeng uceng @husainabdullah1 on May 7, 2018, tweeted, "The Vice President of the Republic of Indonesia, M. Jusuf Kalla when meeting the Chinese PM, Li Keqiang, (7/5 in Jakarta) emphasized that Chinese Investment; prioritizing local labor, environmental preservation, added value for downstream/upstream industries and transfer of technology and high-quality products Cc@saididu". (<https://twitter.com/husainabdullah1/status/993459279452557314>)

Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment @kemenkomarves, "Coordinating Minister Luhut: We will not sacrifice the environment for the sake of the economy." (<https://twitter.com/kemenkomarves/status/1196967840907005955>)

This view is broadly consistent with the Indonesian government's approach and with United Nations policy. Climate change and environmental issues are indeed part of the BRI project's stated focus: several programs have been launched to address population vulnerability and poverty-related mortality, including alignment with the Sendai Framework for disaster risk reduction, the Paris Agreement on climate change, and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Within the BRI, the Digital Belt and Road (DBR) program aims to support international frameworks in science, technology, and innovation by using Big Earth Data for environmental protection, disaster risk reduction, water resource management, urban development, food security, nature conservation, and coastal area development. The DBR framework addresses two broad aims: first, closing gaps in scientific knowledge about earth system processes that govern how terrestrial, freshwater, coastal, and marine ecosystems respond to global warming and environmental change; and second, building cooperation between academics and other communities to integrate science and technology in support of international sustainable development programs. The DBR initiative began as a science project to formalize data structures and analysis methodologies and to develop cloud-based data analytics and sharing platforms for global data. (Huadong, Guo,; Zeeshan Shirazi,; Liang Dong, 2018, pp. 173–182).

2) Jobs and foreign workers

Indonesia has a population of around 270 million, of whom approximately 30 million live in poverty, a condition driven in part by unemployment and limited availability of job opportunities. Against this backdrop, the presence of foreign workers in Indonesia has become a sensitive issue, as some residents feel their job opportunities are being displaced by foreign labor. The BRI project offers hope that it will absorb a substantial number of local workers, particularly given that China's Premier, Li Keqiang, has stated a commitment to prioritizing local workers, offering

fresh hope for the Indonesian government to reduce its poverty rate. (Tritto, 2021). On his Twitter account, President Jokowi emphasized that investment is key to job creation, calling on regional heads to serve investors well, as illustrated in the tweet below:

"I remind regional heads to provide full service and support for businesses that want to invest. Investments that enter a region at that time will also move the regional economy and open up the widest possible employment opportunities". (<https://twitter.com/jokowi/status/1382533387148136450>).

Since the BRI project began, similar concerns about Chinese labor have circulated across Southeast Asia, including in Cambodia and Myanmar as well as Indonesia. The central concern is whether Chinese employers bring in large numbers of low-skilled Chinese workers who might displace opportunities for local labor, placing Indonesia in a difficult position.

On the one hand, the domestic shortage of skilled labor means Indonesia must accept the arrival of foreign workers; on the other, unresolved employment problems can escalate into broader economic and political issues. (玥潘, 2017). This concern is reflected in tweets circulating in Indonesia, such as the following.

Muslim Cyber Army @MCAOps account. August 8 tweeted, "The news of 34 Chinese Foreign Workers (TKA) returning to the country amid the implementation of the Level 4 lockdown has been confirmed by the Immigration Office". (<https://twitter.com/MCAOps/status/1424279460262514694>)

E-Mang Guepikiran™ @M4ngU5il on June 19, 2020, "...some say that production costs in China are cheap because labor is cheap compared to Indonesia?. Whereas here the salaries of Chinese foreign workers are many times higher than our workers even though their expertise is only defecating. On location shamelessly...hahaha". (<https://twitter.com/M4ngU5il/status/1273822061614358528>)

The ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, based in Singapore, released the results of a survey that about 50.2% of respondents allowed Chinese workers to work in Indonesia. Around 26.6% oppose the policy that helps Chinese workers, and 19.9% enable Chinese workers to work in Indonesia because they have high skills. (Damuri et al., 2019). However, the underlying problem lies in the management of communication, administration, and licensing within the Indonesian government.

It should be recognized that Indonesia has a very high demographic dividend, making the availability of labor an important consideration. At the same time, the right to work is a universal right that extends to mobility both within and between countries. Addressing visa violations therefore requires coordinated task forces drawing on various ministries and institutions, such as Immigration, the Police, and the Ministry of Tourism.

Several influencers offered positive responses regarding Chinese workers, including: @amandasafir4 tweeted, "Chinese companies investing in Indonesia must

use the majority of Indonesian workers," followed by a news link from BBC. News entitled "Li Keqiang instructs Chinese companies to absorb Indonesian workers." (<https://twitter.com/charliesianipar/status/993731518236274688>)

Deni Siregar @denisiregar07, "That's a video of foreigners from China entering Sulawesi at the airport, always repeated with various themes. There is a theme, "Chinese foreign workers invade Indonesia!" Now, "Chinese foreign workers enter Indonesia despite the emergency lockdown!". If it's a hoax, it's updated, you know. I don't get tired of videos like that..". Got 670 retweets and 3,333 likes. (<https://twitter.com/Dennysiregar7/status/1411914563906269186>)

Public opinion in Indonesia has also grown critical of Chinese workers' qualifications, with many perceived violations reported, as illustrated below:

#TorangBisa @BiLLRaY2019 on June 21, 2020, "Minister of Manpower, Ida Fauziyah explained that the government approved the entry of Foreign Workers from China to work in Indonesia for technology transfer in Konawe, Southeast Sulawesi." (<https://twitter.com/BiLLRaY2019/status/1274668262265982982>)

Ministry of Manpower, @KemnakerRI, on August 31, 2015. "In the case of the PLTU Celukan, it was found that there were violations, including two unlicensed Chinese foreign workers who were immediately expelled & deported." (<https://twitter.com/KemnakerRI/status/638337694733504512>)

Local media in Medan have reported a similar opinion: some sources indicated they did not object to Chinese nationals holding managerial positions, recognizing that the Chinese-led project in Medan required such expertise given the local shortage of professional workers. However, they maintained that jobs at the lower- and middle-skill levels should still be prioritized for local workers. (Damuri et al., 2019). Where workers violate residence permit rules, Chinese companies are also expected to enforce strict regulations, fully manage compliance requirements, and apply serious sanctions for violations such as misuse of visit visas for work purposes, inadequate housing and food facilities, and unequal treatment of workers. (玥潘, 2017).

Labor-related problems tend to be case-specific rather than systemic, and are not unique to workers from China but also occur among workers from other countries. A small number of individuals violating visa rules or behaving inappropriately toward Indonesian culture should not be generalized into a conclusion about the entire foreign workforce from a given country.

3) Islamic populism

In Indonesia, religious symbols are often deployed for political purposes. Scholar Xu Liping argues that this political dynamic is directed less at the Chinese state or ethnicity itself and more at the Jokowi government, given that foreign investors have gained influence over the business interests of local elites during his administration, a pattern rooted in the close ties between local political elites and business figures that developed over Suharto's three decades of rule prior to reformasi. (玥潘, 2017). Like some of the tweets below;

Mengibarkan bendera Putih @jen_l4u 4 Juli 2021, "The discussion focuses on the arrival of several Chinese foreign workers (who should have been vaccinated & PCR before entering). Yes, you don't seem to be worried about the decline in your compatriot's livelihood because of the ongoing lockdown. Are you either racist or just focused on attacking the government....".

(https://twitter.com/jen_l4u/status/1411649722289328129)

Pria di cermin @ALakaUCAY, on March 21, 2020, "I don't understand, there are still people who are easy to label 'racist' if they criticize China's policies or criticize the government's case with China which is not in favor of the people. Is blaming the Public Enemy album also a racist act? There sometimes I wonder... Thinking face ".

(<https://twitter.com/ALakaUCAY/status/1241149805759352833>)

Unfortunately, the tweet that stated that the opposition did not question ethnicity, but the government's policy, was responded to by pro-government groups saying they behaved racist. This response illustrates how the debate shifted from the substance of the criticism toward an identity-based counter-accusation, a common pattern in polarized social media discourse.

In addition, groups advocating the enforcement of Islamic law remain present in Indonesia, such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia and the Islamic Defenders Front, though both have since been disbanded by the government on ideological grounds. More hardline groups, which the government classifies as terrorist organizations, include Jamaah Islamiyah and Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid, whose numbers continue to dwindle as they are pursued by law enforcement. These groups are generally categorized as Islamic populist, in the sense that religion is reduced to a formal marker of clothing, language, and culture rather than substantive practice, making it easy to co-opt for political purposes. Because most of these groups are opposed to the Jokowi government, they tend to adopt a critical stance toward nearly every government policy, including policies related to China's BRI project.

Indonesia does not hold a generally negative view of capitalist or socialist ideology as such. The issue most hotly debated in Indonesia is religious sentiment, particularly concerning communism and Muslim solidarity in Xinjiang, both of which some Islamic groups consistently use to corner China, in parallel with how Western governments, including the United States, invoke Xinjiang to accuse China of human rights violations. In Indonesia, however, there remains a degree of residual negative sentiment toward communism. A 2021 survey found that 46% of respondents believed the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) was resurging in Indonesia (cnnindonesia.com, 2021). At the same time, survey agency SMRC (Syaiful Muzani Research and Consulting) announced that 84% of people do not believe that Indonesia's communist ideology will rise. (Abdi, 2021). Overall, relatively few Indonesians harbor deep fear of communist ideology, though this cannot be separated from the tendency of some politicians to use communism as a political commodity to attract votes. Only a small segment of the population holds strongly negative views of communism, sometimes coupled with anti-

Chinese sentiment, a dynamic that appears to serve the interests of certain political elites and shapes electability calculations in general elections.

Some of the communist-related issues used to build a narrative against China include:

Adhie M Massardi @AdhieMassardi, on September 24, 2020, "Communist China smuggles communist ideology in investment packages. President for life in modern culture makes Xi Jinping like a giant communist monster." (<https://twitter.com/AdhieMassardi/status/1309104615019999235>)

👊 **Muslim Cyber Army** 🇲🇻 @MCAOps, on May 9, 2021 "Observer: "The arrival of Chinese foreign workers wave after wave is striking the public eye. Not to mention the closeness of some political parties to the Chinese Communist Party. Be wary of investments that can turn into infiltration, annexation, and elimination." (<https://twitter.com/MCAOps/status/1391174007626485760>)

On the issue of Xinjiang's Muslim population, Western media have consistently constructed a narrative alleging human rights violations, including reports that Xinjiang residents have been tortured, separated from their families, and placed in internment camps, alongside allegations that ethnic Uyghurs are subjected to forced labor supporting China's clothing exports. These narratives, widely circulated in the Indonesian news, are amplified further by opposition groups seeking to undermine President Jokowi's credibility, with Western media framing used as a reference point to delegitimize his government due to its close ties with China. As a result, the BRI project has been drawn into this broader narrative contest.

4) Debt trap

The issue of debt traps strengthened in public opinion in Indonesia after information emerged from AidData, which released its research on "Hidden debt" from China. The study was released on September 29, 2021, which states that there is a hidden debt problem of US\$385 billion behind China's BRI projects around the world. Indonesia itself is said to have a "hidden debt" from the Chinese government of US \$ 17.28 billion or 1.6% of gross domestic product. (Akbar, 2021). The publication of AidData's research was immediately captured and used as a reference by the media in Indonesia. The information went viral and became a trending topic on Indonesian Twitter. Many uninformed laypeople came to accept it at face value, contributing to a growing negative opinion in Indonesia that treated China's debt trap as an established fact, as reflected in the tweets below:

DPP PKS @PKSejahtera, on October 22, 2021, "PKS highlights Indonesia's hidden debt to China. AidData finds that Indonesia's hidden debt to China is estimated at IDR 245 trillion to finance various large government projects. "Don't underestimate this finding."

(<https://twitter.com/PKSejahtera/status/1451395347159207936>)

Democracy_Is_Dead Mengibarkan bendera hitam @Romelah_mel, on May 10, 2019. "China does not colonize with weapons, but with debt traps!. It's smart to think.

Zimbabwe, Angola, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka are some countries that have fallen victim to their debt traps. Even Zimbabwe even changed its currency to Yuan. Compensation can not pay the debt!”.

(https://twitter.com/Romelah_mel/status/1126604757362044928)

Muhammad Said Didu @msaid_didu on October 7, “If you are not careful, Indonesia could be one of the countries trapped in debt from China as experienced by many countries. China's "investment" trap through the BRI (Belt and Road Investment) program.” (https://mobile.twitter.com/msaid_didu/status/1446050220970692609).

Mas Piyu @maspiyuaja. "Tere Liye: High-speed rail project, China's debt trap, people are suffering." Got 369 Retweets, 22 Quoted Tweets, 1,014 Likes. (<https://twitter.com/maspiyuaja/status/1447697263824752643>)

"Hidden debt," in this context, refers to debt owed by developing countries that does not pass through the lending country's government but is instead owed directly to state-owned enterprises, banks, or the private sector, meaning it is not officially recorded as sovereign debt. This nuance receives little attention from netizens. Instead, the prevailing public perception in Indonesia is that China-funded infrastructure projects carry the potential for a debt trap, and that mounting unpaid debt could ultimately compromise national sovereignty. Several pro-government accounts have attempted to clarify this distinction.

Yustinus Prastowo, Ministry of Finance expert staff, @prastow, tweeting, “There is a lot of talk about 'hidden debt' or hidden debt from China's version of AidData. In order not to be confused and clear, we explain the problem. The information conveyed is inaccurate and prone to being fried to charred. It's not the government's debt, but it's linked.” Liked 1822 and retweeted 780 times.

(<https://twitter.com/prastow/status/1448868033951195139>)

Tempo magazine account, @tempodotco, "It's not true that China gives the biggest debt to Indonesia, that's ridiculous.". Accompanied by a news link, commentary from economic figure Faisal Basri.

(<https://twitter.com/tempodotco/status/1111256063121096705>)

However, Yustinus Prastowo, an expert staff of the minister of finance and Deni Siregar, refuted the narrative on social media. They explained that the debt was private debt. In addition, China has approached other countries through economics, not military power. Even credible media such as Tempo magazine explained that it is not true that China is Indonesia's biggest lender.

A related controversy emerged around Indonesia's Job Creation Law, which many people and students protested as excessively favorable to foreign investors and as potentially enabling illegal exploitation of natural resources. This controversy mobilized numerous activists on social media, including:

Jumhur Hidayat @jumhurhidayat, October 7, 2020 “This law is indeed for Primitive Investors from the PRC and greedy entrepreneurs. For civilized investors, it's

as follows: 35 Foreign Investors Express Their Distress against the Ratification of the Job Creation Law, Click to read: <http://kmp.im/AGA6m2>". 334 Retweets 10 Quotes Tweet 692 Likes.

(<https://mobile.twitter.com/jumhurhidayat/status/1313649613933473792>)

Syahganda Nainggolan @syahganda, on October 13, 2020 • "Dinner is getting crazy looking at the nudist. Now the defense minister, Jokowi, is accusing foreigners of the demonstration. Well, inconsistent, KAMI or the foreigners you are blaming?????. This Twitter got 1,283 Retweets, 116 Quoted Tweets, 4,417 Likes. (<https://twitter.com/syahganda/status/1315733067416313856>) The tweets from Jumhur Hidayat and Syahganda Nainggolan above represent a form of protest against the government, reflecting their view that foreign interests were being advanced under cover of the Job Creation Law. Both individuals were subsequently arrested by police because of these tweets, a move that drew public criticism as being anti-critic and damaging to democracy. The two activists were ultimately sentenced to ten months in prison for spreading hatred and inciting unrest.

5) State sovereignty

Western media, such as The Washington Post, remain skeptical of China's intentions. One example is the suspicion that Huawei's technology deployed in Bangladesh and other BRI countries serves as a channel for Chinese intelligence surveillance (Yu & Yan, 2020, pp. 72–78).

This concern found in Western media has also taken hold in Indonesia, where a growing opinion suspects a hidden agenda behind the BRI China project, primarily centered on debt traps and South China Sea sovereignty. This has translated into a serious public concern about state sovereignty, reasoning that a country with debts to another is automatically dependent on and subordinate to the lending country. This view is not entirely wrong, but it is not always accurate either.

The United States itself holds relatively large foreign debt to countries such as the UK, Canada, and Japan, including a significant obligation to China of US\$1.7 trillion, or 15% of its total foreign debt, making China its second-largest lender after Japan. (Cahyani, 2021). This is evidenced by the fact that America's posture toward China shows no sign of subordination or dependency despite this debt relationship.

On the contrary, America's posture toward China has remained assertive rather than deferential in trade and diplomacy, which suggests that a country's foreign debt level does not by itself determine its degree of dependency on the lending country. This suggests that the strength of a country's sovereignty in practice depends less on debt volume and more on how a government positions itself in negotiating and managing its relationships with other nations. On that basis, Indonesia's sovereignty concerns would depend on whether agreements are structured on terms of mutual benefit and equal standing, rather than on debt levels alone.

Another growing public concern is that if debts cannot be repaid due to poor economic planning, BRI-affiliated projects could ultimately fall under Chinese ownership, a fear often illustrated by the case of a port in Sri Lanka that China now

operates after Sri Lanka was unable to repay its debt. However, each country's circumstances, government policies, and diplomatic approach differ, meaning the Sri Lankan and Indonesian cases cannot be directly equated; Indonesia's balance sheet and GDP are also considerably larger than Sri Lanka's. Several Twitter accounts have nonetheless highlighted concerns about Indonesian sovereignty being put at risk by investment, including:

#99@PartaiSocmed "Is China's investment/debt a "debt-trap diplomacy" in the case of ownership disputes in the Natuna Sea?. Would you mind paying attention to the responses of these old generals, both Luhut and Prabowo? They both invest more than their state ownership."

(<https://twitter.com/partaisocmed/status/1213109045864759296>).

kumparan@kumparan, "Luhut asked all parties not to make a fuss about China's violations. Worried about disrupting investment."

(<https://twitter.com/PartaiSocmed/status/1213109045864759296>)

Benny K Harman @BennyHarmanID, "Fahri Hamzah: Adopted the Copyright Act from the Chinese Communist System. Correctly. But there, the law is a tool of the capitalists. The state is their tool. Worse yet, the president is a puppet of the barons. It's over there. In our country? Free!". Twitt of the Democratic Party leader, satirizes the Indonesian state.

(<https://twitter.com/BennyHarmanID/status/1316948796073443328>)

Akun Alvin Lie @alvinlie21, "It is very disappointing that investment in the sovereignty of the country's territory is as if only China can afford to invest in Indonesia and Indonesia can only be offered to China. As an Indonesian citizen, I am very disappointed, ashamed, and cannot accept the Coordinator Minister's logic." Alvin Lie is the Ombusmen commissioner and an Indonesian citizen of Chinese descent. The tweet was liked 1,385 and retweeted 830 times.

(<https://twitter.com/alvinlie21/status/1213298261303296000>)

Several accounts have attempted to refute this troubling sovereignty narrative, though these rebuttals have not achieved wide reach or significant public engagement. Examples include:

Jimly Asshiddiqie @JimlyAs, on October 22, 2020, "After the US Foreign Minister visits, it will become clearer that the US will persevere in persuading Indonesia not to take sides with China. It is a golden opportunity to pressure the US to sign an agreement to move its industrial factories from China to Indonesia. If necessary, make laws/government regulations specifically to facilitate their investment. It could be that the job creation law is irrelevant."

(<https://twitter.com/JimlyAs/status/1319271734403461120>)

iNews @OfficialiNewsTV "JK: Mutual Benefit is the Main Principle of Indonesia-China Cooperation,"

(<https://twitter.com/OfficialiNewsTV/status/1121692893905813505>)

Dr.M.Fadjroel Rachman @fadjroel " There is no bargaining over Indonesia's national sovereignty," said President Joko Widodo. This morning Wednesday (8/1/2020), President @jokowi told #NATUNA to check the readiness of the Indonesian National Army troops to defend Indonesian sovereignty & work on fisheries development ~ #Jubir @Puspen_TNI @GUIDE_ID".

(<https://twitter.com/fadjroel/status/1214829605619560454>)

6) Maritime Axis

The strategic alignment between Indonesia and China continues to face challenges, including the involvement of the United States and its allies in the South China Sea region, underscoring the need to strengthen maritime security collaboration in the area. (博马, n.d.). On the other hand, China's economic and military power is increasing. It raises a question mark for ASEAN countries. They are worried about the threat to the country's sovereignty, which has been relatively stable so far. (Fitriani, 2018).

Much public opinion on Indonesian Twitter highlights the complexity of the South China Sea and Natuna Sea disputes, with pessimistic sentiments illustrated below:

Musni Umar @musniumar, on January 9, 2020, tweeted, "Indonesia does not need to be afraid of China in the case in the Natuna Sea. The United States, for example, can be countered by Iran. Indonesia, The ownership of the country, is robbed. It does not dare to fight. The key is a strong Indonesian nation. United we stand, divided we fall".

(<https://twitter.com/musniumar/status/1215262992490647554>)

#FahriHamzah2021 @Fahrihamzah "Mother's theory of increasing fish numbers after the "bombing" show is a lie. There is no need to count the fish heads in the sea, 75% of the earth, and 75% of the archipelago. We can't even count the heads of the poor. Jokowi's maritime axis unclear. In the sea, we perish". (<https://twitter.com/Fahrihamzah/status/1017257110055161858>)

Dr. Rizal Ramli @RamliRizal "Unlike America, China has territorial ambitions. America, although wanting to be influential, has no territorial ambitions. The Indonesian people cannot accept this territorial ambition. Must be resisted."

(<https://twitter.com/RamliRizal/status/1325146778627309575>)

Musni Umar, Rizal Ramli, and Fahri Hamzah, all public figures with backgrounds in bureaucracy or opposition politics, argue that China is being too aggressive in the South China Sea; Rizal Ramli, in particular, contends that China holds territorial ambitions there while the United States does not. Their critical positioning on this issue is broadly consistent with their wider political stance toward the government.

Other perspectives build a more positive narrative around Indonesia's development and sovereignty in the South China Sea and the Maritime Silk Road project, as reflected below:

The 2018 fishery and marine minister's account, Susi Pujiastuti, via the @susi Pujiastuti account, tweeted, "Indonesia is sovereign because the President has ordered us to maintain sovereignty from the start."

(<https://twitter.com/susipudjiastuti/status/107742433595697152>)

Even the commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces, Hadi Tjahjanto @TjahjantoHadi, on December 30, 2018, tweeted, "Natuna is like the porch of a house on the beach which is directly facing the open sea. Inauguration of the 3 Matra Integrated the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) Unit in Ranai to ensure Indonesian ownership remains upright and intact. Let's invigorate together the spirit of defending the country and love for the Indonesian homeland. Indonesian flag".

(<https://twitter.com/TjahjantoHadi/status/1079330426194259969>)

Mahfud MD @mohmahfudmd, "Natuna is so beautiful, fertile, and rich. The people and culture are gentle. The state must be present not only de jure but also de facto. Today together with the Minister of Maritime Affairs and civil and military officials, Central and Regional, we went to Natuna and held a meeting on the Ship of the Republic of Indonesia".

(<https://twitter.com/mohmahfudmd/status/1217349085620920325>)

The Indonesian government has officially tweeted from the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs, the Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, and the Commander of the Indonesian Armed Forces, clearly stating that Indonesia also has sovereignty in the Natuna Sea. This sovereignty claim would likely require further negotiation in the event of overlapping claims between Indonesia and other countries. However, the matter would become more complicated if third countries intervened, as Western governments, India, and even Australia and Japan have previously done. It is preferable for such disputes to be resolved directly between the countries involved. There is no need for other countries to interfere.

Read through the lens introduced in the literature review, the six thematic issues discussed above illustrate agenda-setting and framing dynamics operating in tandem on Indonesian Twitter. Opposition-aligned accounts consistently succeeded in setting the agenda on debt, sovereignty, and labor issues by sustaining narrative volume, while government and pro-government accounts more often responded reactively or not at all, ceding framing control over these issues by default rather than through a deliberate communication strategy. The same underlying facts, such as the AidData hidden-debt report or the Natuna Sea disputes, were framed alternately as evidence of exploitative dependency or as manageable diplomatic and fiscal matters, depending on which political actor was narrating them, which is consistent with framing theory's account of how issue interpretation, not only issue exposure, shapes public sentiment. For communication scholars and practitioners, this suggests that

responding to isolated claims after they trend is less effective than establishing a sustained, coordinated narrative presence before an issue is picked up by opposition-aligned accounts. For policymakers, it implies that technically accurate rebuttals (e.g., clarifying that hidden debt is private-sector rather than sovereign debt) are unlikely to shift public sentiment unless paired with a consistent framing strategy and delivered through a broader and more coordinated set of voices than a single ministry spokesperson.

CONCLUSION

The various findings discussed above make clear that both the Indonesian public and the international community hold divergent views on the BRI project initiated by China, with some expressing support and others raising criticism for various reasons. This research shows that while the Indonesian government has adopted an open stance, actively supporting and overseeing BRI project implementation, the growing public opinion expressed on social media runs in the opposite direction. Three main factors help explain this predominantly negative public opinion. First, government public communication and its supporting groups were weak, as reflected in narratives and issues that lacked focus and gave an impression of poor coordination. Second, opposition groups were unified and mutually reinforcing, allowing them to dominate the social media narrative, a strength partly rooted in political polarization from the general election that was never fully resolved. Third, because Indonesia operates as a democratic system, threatening, intimidating, or repressing critics of the BRI project is counterproductive, since suppressing opinion tends to provoke greater resistance rather than consensus. Further research is needed to build a more comprehensive understanding of the BRI project in Indonesia, particularly regarding the actual response of communities to the impacts felt after certain infrastructure projects are completed, and how social media responses subsequently shape public opinion around those impacts. Such research would benefit from broadening data sources to include other social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube, as well as new media based on news portals, in order to develop a deeper and more thorough understanding of Indonesian public opinion on the BRI project. In addition, the methodology could be expanded to incorporate discourse analysis, content analysis, news framing analysis, and semiotic analysis, as drawing on multiple research methods would likely yield more accurate and rigorous results.

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