

China's Economic Diplomacy Strategies: An Analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asian Countries

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Article Info

Article History

Received:

05 November 2024

Accepted:

06 December 2024

Published:

09 December 2024

Keywords

Economic Diplomacy
Belt and Road
Initiative (BRI)
Southeast Asia

Kata Kunci

Diplomasi Ekonomi
Inisiatif Sabuk dan
Jalan (BRI)
Asia Tenggara

Abstrak

Inisiatif Sabuk dan Jalan (BRI) yang diluncurkan oleh Tiongkok pada tahun 2013, merupakan program pembangunan dan infrastruktur monumental yang dirancang untuk meningkatkan konektivitas dan kerja sama ekonomi di Asia, Eropa, dan sekitarnya. Asia Tenggara, yang merupakan wilayah kunci dalam kalkulus strategis Tiongkok, telah menyaksikan beragam keterlibatan di bawah kerangka kerja BRI. Terdapat 8 negara di Asia Tenggara yang terlibat dalam kerja sama ini dan 4 negara yang akan dianalisa sebagai perbandingan, yaitu Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, dan Filipina. Keterlibatan 4 negara ini dalam BRI menjadi pertanyaan besar, yaitu bagaimana strategi diplomasi ekonomi yang dilakukan oleh China terhadap negara-negara tersebut sehingga mereka mau menjalin kerjasama BRI dengan China. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini akan menganalisa perbedaan strategi diplomasi ekonomi Tiongkok melalui BRI terhadap empat negara Asia Tenggara yang memiliki latar belakang yang berbeda. Pendekatan diplomasi ekonomi Tiongkok melalui BRI memiliki banyak aspek dan menyesuaikan dengan konteks politik, ekonomi, dan budaya yang berbeda-beda di negara-negara Asia Tenggara. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga akan menganalisis dampak dari kerja sama BRI terhadap negara-negara tersebut. Penelitian ini akan menggunakan pendekatan diplomasi ekonomi karena dapat membantu menganalisis strategi diplomasi ekonomi yang dilakukan oleh Tiongkok melalui BRI untuk mencapai kepentingan nasionalnya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode studi literatur dan analisis komparatif dengan menggunakan data kualitatif. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa terdapat perbedaan strategi dan pendekatan diplomasi ekonomi yang dilakukan oleh China melalui BRI kepada Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam dan Filipina serta negara tersebut memiliki penilaian yang berbeda terkait dampak dari BRI.

Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, is a monumental development and infrastructure program designed to enhance connectivity and economic cooperation across Asia, Europe, and beyond. Southeast Asia, being a key region in China's strategic calculus, has witnessed diverse engagements under the BRI framework. There are certainly 8 countries in Southeast Asia involved in the cooperation and 4 countries that will be analysed for comparison, namely Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines. The involvement of these 4 countries in BRI is a big question, namely how the economic diplomatic strategy carried out by China towards these countries so that they want to establish BRI cooperation with China. Therefore, this study will analyse the differences in China's economic diplomacy strategies through BRI towards four Southeast Asian countries that have different backgrounds. China's approach to economic diplomacy through the BRI is multifaceted and

adapts to the varying political, economic, and cultural contexts of Southeast Asian countries. In addition, this study will also analyse the impact of BRI cooperation on these countries. This study will use economic diplomacy because it can help analyse the economic diplomacy strategy carried out by China through the BRI to achieve its national interests. This study uses the literature study method and comparative analysis using qualitative data. The results of this study show that there are different strategies and approaches to economic diplomacy by China through BRI to Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines and they have different assessments regarding the impact of BRI.

Introduction

In an effort to enhance its key strategies and international co-operation, China created the BRI. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping established the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), previously known as the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR), to foster cooperation in the economy, through infrastructure investment and to break the barriers to connectivity between Asia, Africa and Europe (Port Economics Management and Policy, 2021). It aims to create regional integration that can increase trade and stimulate world economic growth. The BRI is inspired by China's historical history, which is the Silk Road idea developed during the Han Dynasty 2,000 years ago in relation to the old trade route connecting China to the Mediterranean across Eurasia (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, n.d.). In addition to historical grounds, the BRI was founded on geoeconomic elements relating to China's attempts to achieve growing the economy and build trade cooperation agreements with countries that are developing. Moreover, the most important factor in encouraging the formation of BRI is the geopolitical factor where China aims to extend its power by taking on a global leadership position through economic diplomacy.

The BRI is a Chinese-led investment initiative for building infrastructure including transportation systems, seaports, airports, telecommunications networks, and electric power plants. The BRI proposes five primary goals for its program: Policies collaboration, infrastructure that is connection, free commerce, integration of finances, and connecting people (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, n.d.). It is reported that in December 2023, through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China, the number of countries joining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reached 151, however since to the confusion of the MoU, it was reported that 146 to 151 countries (Nedopil Christoph, 2023). The cooperation agreement was signed by 8 Southeast Asian

countries: Thailand (2014), Indonesia (2015), Myanmar (2016), Malaysia (2017), Timor-Leste (2017), the Philippines (2017), Vietnam (2017), and Brunei Darussalam (2018).

The engagement of these eight Southeast Asian nations in BRI partnership poses an important question: how the economic diplomatic strategy carried out by China has influenced these countries to desire to build BRI cooperation with China. However, in this research only four countries involved in the BRI will be analysed, namely Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines. That is because these four countries will represent China's diplomatic economic strategy approach as well as an assessment of the impact of the BRI on countries in Southeast Asia such as neutral, positive and negative. Therefore, this study will analyse the differences in China's economic diplomacy strategies through BRI towards four Southeast Asian countries that have different backgrounds. In addition, this study will also analyse the impact of BRI cooperation on these countries. Certainly, this study is a new analysis and discussion and different from previous studies, because this study analyses the different economic diplomacy strategies used by China in Southeast Asian countries. Furthermore, the analysis of this study will also be more comprehensive because it covers four countries in Southeast Asia involved in BRI cooperation.

Theoretical Framework

Economic diplomacy is a concept that integrates economic policy with diplomatic strategies to advance national interests, strengthen economic relations between countries, and utilize economic policy to achieve political goals. According to Maaik Okano-Heijmans, economic diplomacy is the political means as leverage in international negotiations with the aim of enhancing national economic prosperity, and the use of economic leverage to increase the political stability of the nation (Okano-Heijmans & Asano, 2018, pp. 251–266). Economic diplomacy involves negotiating trade policies, market access, investment, and cooperation between countries in increasing economic growth, creating jobs, and strengthening national economic competitiveness (Bayne & Woolcock, 2011, pp. 1–16). This emphasizes the importance of economic diplomacy in influencing global economic policy for the national interest.

In the context of China's economic diplomacy through BRI in Southeast Asian countries, it can be seen that this is a strategy carried out by China to achieve its national

interests. This is because of economic diplomacy carried out by China to increase its national economic prosperity. China's strategy through BRI certainly aims to develop infrastructure and invest in Southeast Asian countries in the form of loans. So, it will not only strengthen economic relations between countries and China's political stability, but will also strengthen China's position as a major actor in the global economy. It can also be seen that BRI is also being used by countries in Southeast Asia to improve their economic welfare. Thus, a country's involvement in the BRI cooperation offered by China means recognizing the importance of strengthening their economic relations to achieve political results.

Research Method

This research uses the literature research method or literature study. Collection of data is obtained through books, journals, articles, websites, news, or from various other related sources or official government statements, agreements, and reports related to BRI cooperation between China and Southeast Asian countries. In order to show the policies, perspectives, and results of economic diplomacy of China in these countries officially. Besides that, it will also use the comparative analysis method to assess the differences in China's economic diplomacy strategies in four Southeast Asian countries. Hence, it can understand how historical, cultural, geography and economic factors affect the success and challenges faced in BRI cooperation. Therefore, this study uses qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive and in-depth explanation. This research was conducted in several steps, including collecting research materials in the form of information from various literatures, reading and understanding literature materials, analysing data and information, making research notes, processing research notes for comparison, conclusions.

Results and Discussion

Thailand

As one of China's neighbouring countries, Thailand considers BRI an initiative built to achieve mutual benefits. This was marked by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between China and Thailand regarding cooperation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on September 4 2017 (Xinhua Silk Road Information Service, 2020). Certainly, China's economic diplomacy strategy through the BRI was carried out because

Thailand was able to connect China's Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CIPEC) development plan which connects the Pearl River Delta with the Greater Mekong Sub-Regional Economic Co-operation (GMS) in Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam (Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayaskun, 2021, pp. 69–77). So that the cooperation and trade relationship between CIPEC and GMS can help expand China's new Silk Route. On the other hand, this location is also beneficial for Thailand because the construction of the road network and development of routes such as the R3A and R9 routes are important trade and tourism routes between Thailand and China. Therefore, Thailand is willing to be involved in BRI cooperation with China because it can fulfil its national interests, especially in developing trade route infrastructure.

BRI's cooperation policy between China and Thailand covers several sectors, and BRI's policy regarding Thailand's economic development is contained in the 20 Year Strategy 2018 - 2037. The goal is for Thailand to achieve high-income status by 2036, then the 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan 2023 - 2027 and Bio-Model of Circular-Green Economy (BCG) (Zijing, 2023). Certainly, the main strategy in BRI cooperation is infrastructure development, digital and connectivity, development of innovative industries "Thailand 4.0 model", development of modern agriculture and balanced and sustainable development of human resources. Director of Department of International Trade Promotion (DITP), Ministry of Commerce, Thailand said that Thailand is confident that under President Xi Jinping's vision and leadership on shared development under BRI, Thailand as one of the BRI-participating countries is tapping into further economic, social, and environmental growth (Zijing, 2023). This shows that Thailand believes and supports the potential opportunities for cooperation with China in the BRI in an open and inclusive manner.

Thailand has a history of closeness to China after the 2014 military coup, so when President Xi Jinping introduced the BRI a decade ago, Thailand was one of the countries that strongly supported it. One of the BRI projects in Thailand is the Thailand-China high-speed train project. In terms of infrastructure development, namely if the High-Speed Train Project - Bangkok Nong Khai route is completed then this will be beneficial for tourism development in the northeastern region of Thailand. BRI cooperation is also an opportunity for Thailand to get more Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from China. Director, Institute of

Security and International Studies (ISIS Thailand), Pongsphisoot (Paul) Busbarat stated that overall, BRI projects in Thailand over the last ten years have had a positive impact, although there are noteworthy opportunities and challenges (Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayaskun, 2021). This is because the BRI project has increased Thailand's economic growth and strengthened economic ties with China. Although on the other hand, BRI also affects the stability, way of life and culture of the Thai people due to the migration of Chinese workers and even impacts the environment as well as the trade deficit.

Indonesia

In the context of historical ties, Indonesia has established close diplomatic relations and cooperation with China after independence, in fact Indonesia was the first Southeast Asian country to establish official diplomatic relations with China (Wulandari & Inayah, 2021, p. 3). Apart from that, the principle of free and active foreign policy that Indonesia adheres to also encourages cooperation and collaboration with China. However, Indonesia's diplomatic relations experienced ups and downs, marked by the decline in Indonesia's diplomatic relations with China during the Soeharto era due to the communist issue (Wulandari & Inayah, 2021, p. 3). This is certainly in contrast to the diplomatic relations that occurred during the Soekarno government, where close bilateral relations were established. Then, in 1990, when the economic crisis occurred in Indonesia, it prompted the normalization of relations with China, which then continues to increase to this day. Therefore, China's economic diplomacy strategy through BRI towards Indonesia is easier because it has historical ties and strong diplomatic relations.

Currently, under President Joko Widodo, cooperative relations between Indonesia and China are getting stronger. This is proven by Indonesia signing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with China in 2015 which occurred when President Xi Jinping visited Indonesia in October 2013 (Dil, 2023, p. 40). This signing is in line with Joko Widodo's main focus on infrastructure development and encouraging deeper cooperation with China. Not only that, President Xi Jinping's visit is an economic diplomacy strategy carried out by China to introduce the BRI concept in developing road and railway infrastructure (Dil, 2023, p. 40). Considering that Indonesia is at the centre of important world trade routes, China is encouraging infrastructure development in Indonesia because it will increase Indonesia's

maritime and trade cooperation with China. So, it can be seen that both Indonesia and China are taking advantage of BRI cooperation to achieve their national interests.

The impact of BRI in Indonesia can be seen from two perspectives, considering that over the last decade China has invested very heavily in Indonesia, one of which is in the infrastructure aspect. Currently, BRI has 71 programs in Indonesia with a total of \$20.3 billion (Busbarat et al., 2023). Including Chinese investment in Indonesia's new capital city, Nusantara (IKN), with a contract worth \$32 billion, as well as the Rempang Island eco-city project worth \$11.5 billion (Busbarat et al., 2023). From an economic perspective, investments made by China can increase Indonesia's economic growth. This is because if it is directed at infrastructure development, such as connecting Java Island with the eastern region, there will be economic growth and regional connectivity.

In the economic context, Chinese investment can also lead to Indonesia's dependence and increased debt. Apart from that, there are social problems such as the influx of Chinese workers which causes tension between Indonesian and Chinese workers, as well as the relocation of indigenous communities which causes conflict between local residents and the Indonesian government. According to Fadhila Inas Pratiwi, Lecturer Department of International Relations, Airlangga University, Indonesia stated that "The BRI project which has been running for a decade in Indonesia has had a positive impact, but there are several areas that require improvement, including transparency, accountability and risk management" (Busbarat et al., 2023). Thus, BRI's investment in Indonesia has a positive impact because it is in line with its national interests despite several negative aspects that need to be considered.

Vietnam

China is trying to get strategic partners in the Southeast Asia region which directly borders it both on land and at sea. Certainly, Vietnam is the right and closest country to help mobilize Chinese commodities to Southeast Asia quickly and efficiently. This is because Vietnam can connect China with Southeast Asia. Thus, China's economic diplomacy strategy towards Vietnam is to provide fast funding and infrastructure development when Vietnam needs at least 605 billion USD to develop infrastructure needs in 2016-2040 (Kurniawan & Gaol, 2021, p. 3). Although, there are heated relations between Vietnam and

China regarding the South China Sea dispute. However, BRI cooperation is a diplomatic and economic tool for China to exert economic and strategic influence in Vietnam.

Since the normalization of bilateral relations in 1991, Vietnam and China have continued to make various efforts to achieve peaceful and stable cooperative relations. This is proven by Vietnam and China signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the “Two Corridors, One Belt” and BRI framework when President Xi Jinping visited Hanoi in November 2017 (Hong Hiep, 2018, p. 83). BRI's role is as a source of funding for infrastructure projects in Vietnam, considering that in 2016 and 2020 the need for infrastructure investment doubled from the 2011-15 period, reaching US\$23.4 billion (Hong Hiep, 2018, p. 82). In addition, since 2019 China has been recorded as the 7th largest foreign investor in Vietnam, with 2,212 projects and US\$13.58 billion in registered capital (Hong Hiep, 2018, p. 80). According to Lowy Institute data, it is recorded that China promised 7.00 billion loans, and the total that has just been spent on infrastructure financing in Vietnam is only 2.34 billion with 14 projects and 33% realization (Ha, 2023). Chinese-funded infrastructure projects in Vietnam mostly include coal-fired power plants, rail system improvements and a metro line in Hanoi.

The number of Chinese projects in Vietnam has increased in the last ten years, including projects that were previously announced and included in the BRI by China. However, there are several things that need to be considered from Vietnam's point of view, where they always associate BRI with the "Two Corridors, One Belt" (TCOB) framework proposed by Vietnam in 2004 before BRI, there are even some parties who use the words "Chinese ODA" or “Chinese loans” and not BRI. Apart from that, they have concerns about BRI and hope that BRI can have quality and comply with international law. According to Research officer, East Sea Institute, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, MFA Vietnam, Hoàng Đỗ, said that Vietnam officially welcomed the BRI and high-level leaders highlighted the potential of the BRI (Busbarat et al., 2023). However, due to various views from other sectors including academics or the media, they are starting to highlight the provision of public goods and greater regional income related to the railway project as well as economic problems and social problems such as environmental damage. Thus, stating that Vietnam is in a neutral position in assessing the impact of the BRI on its country.

Philippines

Tensions between China and the Philippines have recently increased due to the dispute over the Spratly Islands because for years China claimed almost the entire South China Sea area. Until 2016, an international court sided with the Philippines, stating that China's claims in the South China Sea had no basis in international law. These tensions increased even more after President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was elected and was in a position not to have a good attitude towards dealing with a different China like his predecessor (Walker, 2023). However, despite these tensions as neighbouring countries, China and the Philippines have continued to carry out economic and trade cooperation in recent years. This is demonstrated by the largest trading partner in the Philippines for six consecutive years being China, where there has been an increase in the value of new contracts signed by Chinese companies in the Philippines which has exceeded \$10 billion or three times (Global Times, 2023). Apart from bilateral cooperation, the two countries hope to expand regional cooperation that focuses on investment, digitalization, economic and social development.

It is hoped that the diplomatic economic strategy implemented by China through BRI can help develop infrastructure and facilities in various countries in the world, one of which is the Philippines. On the other hand, the Philippines will also benefit from economic diplomacy carried out by China because with the Philippines' involvement in the BRI, it can connect the northern and southern parts of Manila in the Philippines to the provincial cities of Ningbo and Qingdao and Shanghai in China. In supporting and participating in China's revival of the ancient Silk Road trade, the Philippines and China signed a memorandum of understanding to cooperate under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on November 26, 2018 (Ranada, 2018). The prospects of BRI in the Philippines can be seen through the BRI's "Five Connectivities" where the policy increases trade, investment, finance, and connectivity between communities such as tourism, the Philippines' access to the Chinese labour market (Rabena, 2022). However, not all Chinese projects in the Philippines are directly marked as part of the BRI, as many projects are supported by private Chinese investment but are considered illegal by the Chinese government.

BRI's participation in the Philippines is not only in terms of infrastructure development and connectivity, but there are also other areas that have been signed and are making progress. According to the Philippine finance department, Chinese-funded

infrastructure projects under the BBB are currently making significant progress such as the Binondo-Intramuros and Estrella-Pantaleon bridges amounting to USD 63.13 million, the Chico River Pump Irrigation worth USD 62.09 million and the Water Resources Project New Centennial - Kaliwa Dam worth USD 211.21 million (Garriga, 2020, p. 3). However, the BRI project in the Philippines depends on the political calculations of the government in power. This is proven by the differences in projects implemented during each leadership period, starting with the leadership of Benigno Aquino III who did not work on large BRI projects, but on the other hand, during Rodrigo Duterte's administration, large-scale BRI projects were agreed and implemented (Busbarat et al., 2023). Even when President Bongbong Marcos became president in 2022, he cancelled three early-stage rail projects in Luzon and Mindanao, so Marcos has not approved any new BRI projects.

The cooperation involved in the BRI is Certainly assessed for its impact on the Philippines so far. According to Assistant Professor, Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver, Alvin Camba, as experts from eight Southeast Asian countries representing the Philippines, expressed negative opinions and assessments regarding the impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Philippines over the last decade (Busbarat et al., 2023). Certainly, this assessment is based on the many negative impacts of BRI, such as indirectly channelling what is known as illicit Chinese capital in the Philippines. This happens because many of these foreign companies and investors either directly or indirectly collaborate with online gambling companies or criminal enterprises, resulting in an increase in money laundering, sex work, and violence in the Philippines. In addition, it was also stated that although the Philippines has received economic benefits from construction activities and local employment, large-scale BRI projects have not shifted the Philippine economy towards a stronger and longer-term development model (Busbarat et al., 2023). Therefore, it is very clear that the Philippines has given a negative assessment of the impact of the BRI.

Conclusion

China's economic diplomacy through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Southeast Asia shows diverse strategies and impacts in Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines. Indonesia benefits from smooth BRI cooperation due to strong historical and

diplomatic ties with the PRC, while Thailand and the Philippines engage based on mutual benefits, with significant factors shaping their engagement. In Vietnam, rapid PRC infrastructure funding reflects strategic efforts to secure partnerships to mobilise PRC commodities in the region. The impact has been mixed, with Indonesia and Thailand viewing BRI positively despite some concerns about stability, Vietnam taking a neutral stance due to balanced outcomes, and the Philippines viewing it negatively, citing a lack of long-term economic benefits. These different responses underline that China's economic diplomacy strategy through the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia provides a complex picture of regional cooperation. Therefore, the differences in how Southeast Asian countries engage with the BRI reflect their diverse political and economic priorities.

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