

## **Getting Nods from the Muslims: China's Muslim Diplomacy in Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

China has detained an estimated two million Uighur Muslims in concentration camps in the northwestern province of Xinjiang for forced re-education and political indoctrinations. While many human rights organizations have published various accounts of China's actions, many Muslim countries have been silent over the issue. Over the years, alongside economic clout, China has exerted efforts to subdue any criticism from the Muslim countries of its actions in Xinjiang. Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, is no exception. By developing the concept of 'Muslim diplomacy' from the existing literature on China's faith diplomacy, this paper aims to analyze the different efforts implemented by China to co-opt Indonesian Muslims. The paper finds that there are four forms of Muslim diplomacy employed by China in Indonesia, which includes: 1) promoting positive narratives to Indonesian officials, 2) establishing close relations with Muslim organizations, 3) offering scholarships to Muslim students and collaborating with Islamic educational institutions, and 4) expanding media efforts to send positive messages about China.

Keywords: China, Muslim diplomacy, Indonesia, Xinjiang, Uighur

### **1. Introduction**

In October 2022, following a report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, which found that China's mass detention, political indoctrination, and forced assimilation of its Uighur minority in the northwest province of Xinjiang, may amount to crimes against humanity (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022), Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, joined 18 other nations in voting against a motion to discuss the situation in Xinjiang (Dianti, 2022). The campaign to hold China responsible began in May at the hands of the US, the UK, and other Western

countries. Director of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs at Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Achsanul Habib, asserted that the UN Human Rights Council should not be used as a tool to promote 'political rivalries', implying the rivalry between China and the West (*ibid.*).

While this may come as a surprise to many people, the systemic repression of Uighur has sparked only silence from Indonesia (Anwar and Jones, 2019). Over the years, the government in Jakarta, despite defending the rights of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and condemning Israel's apartheid against Palestinians, has viewed the Xinjiang issue as a legitimate response to separatism, and has repeatedly stated that it will not interfere with China's domestic affairs (*ibid.*). Indonesia is not the only Muslim country to react with little angst on the Xinjiang issue. Several studies have shown how Muslim governments have been ignoring China's treatment of the Uighur and some have even gone as far as supporting the Chinese government's policies in Xinjiang. Kelemen and Turcsanyi (2019), for example, argued that domestic politics play an important role in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's responses to the Xinjiang issue. Meanwhile, Bianchi (2019) and Wani (2021) explained that economic considerations such as loans, investments and trade deals are the major reasons behind the Muslim countries' silence. In the Indonesian context, only news reports have tried to explain the country's response to the Uighur issue and the majority argue that 'China has bought' Indonesia with various economic profits (Yuniar, 2022).

The role of the economy is undisputed. Economic ties between China and the Muslim states have existed since the 1990s and have been accelerating with the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI). For the majority of Muslim countries, China is their major trading partner and one of their largest investors (Kelemen and Turcsanyi, 2019). Infrastructure projects under the BRI have been actively implemented across the Muslim world with loans coming from Chinese banks and are often carried out by Chinese workers. Meanwhile, energy-exporting countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar are the top sources of energy for China and their petrodollars have been invested in various sectors in China (Fulton, 2021). This is also relevant when talking about Indonesia. China is currently Indonesia's largest trading partner and investor. In 2021, Indonesia's exports to China reached US\$63.3 billion and the import value from China was US\$60.71 billion (Siqi, 2022). At the same time, China is leading major investment projects including the megaproject – Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Railway – which is one of the largest BRI projects in Southeast Asia (Lim et al., 2021). It was reported that Indonesia has increased its debt to China, reaching US\$411.5 million (Anwar, 2022). In addition, China also became Indonesia's largest supplier of vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic (Yuliantoro, 2022).

While economic and medical cooperation with China can explain Indonesia's reluctance to speak out against human rights abuses in Xinjiang, this has been supported by China's public diplomacy efforts to ensure that narratives on China parrot that of the Chinese government. In the wider Muslim world, Wani (2021) analyzes the roles of the Chinese Islamic Association (CIA), the government body in China to regulate Islamic discourse and religious activity, in controlling the narratives on Xinjiang by cooperating with the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), hosting conferences on Xinjiang attended by religious scholars from several Muslim countries, and organizing tours to mosques and Islamic centres across China. Wani, however, did not specifically discuss China's efforts towards Indonesia. In the context of Indonesia, Anwar and Jones (2019) analysed China's endeavours to deflect Indonesia's Muslim organizations' critics on the Xinjiang issue. Rohman (2019) and Rohman and Amaliyah (2019) have also studied the roles of cultural and religious diplomacy in China–Indonesia relations. Nonetheless, these studies only focused on a few aspects of China's efforts and were only published in 2019, hence unable to capture the developments afterwards. Adopting the concept of public diplomacy, Aswar et al. (2022) examined various public diplomacy efforts carried out by China to maintain its image among the Muslim community in Indonesia. Albeit an important contribution to previous studies, it lacks detailed examples and data of Chinese endeavours.

By developing the concept of 'Muslim diplomacy', this paper aims to contribute to the literature through examining various public diplomacy efforts carried out by China to attain wider acceptance among Muslims in Indonesia. As will be explained in the following section, Muslim diplomacy referred here is public diplomacy activities related to Islam or specifically targeted at followers of Islam. In achieving its objective, the rest of the paper is divided into the following three sections. The next section discusses the notions of faith and Muslim diplomacies, as an analytical framework of the analysis. Afterwards, the paper examines the different forms of China's Muslim diplomacy in Indonesia, and to what degree it has been able to influence the views of the targeted audiences. The final section summarizes the main points of the paper.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: From Faith Diplomacy to Muslim Diplomacy**

### ***2.1. Faith Diplomacy***

Before I discuss the different forms of Muslim diplomacy employed by China in Indonesia, I first lay out the theoretical framework of the paper by first explaining the concept of 'faith diplomacy' which has been around for some time in the literature on China's foreign policy. This section serves

as a preliminary foundation to develop the notion of ‘Muslim diplomacy’. Theoretically, faith diplomacy, or sometimes called religious diplomacy, is a notion that refers to the conception that religion has an instrumental value in helping leaders in achieving a political goal. Religion can serve as a means of legitimizing ruling authority (Ellis and Haar, 1998: 175–201), to form and manipulate alliances based on shared identities (Geertz, 1973; Gil-White, 1999; Chandra, 2006), or to mobilize community support through linking political missions with shared religious ideals (Gayer, 2006).

However, in practice, not many academics have paid attention to the mushrooming phenomenon of religious diplomacy in the field of foreign policy and international relations. In line with the idea that faith diplomacy can be used to strengthen the legitimacy of political rulers at the domestic level, a similar approach can also be implemented in a wider context, such as increasing international legitimacy or the soft power of a particular country, including China. Nye (2004) wrote for the first time a concept of soft power which refers to the power, whether a country or any entity, which is used to persuade other people/parties without requiring coercive action to support certain goals, views and behaviours as desired. A more recent study by Mandaville and Hamid (2018) developed Nye’s theory by specifically defining ‘religious soft power’ as a method whereby ‘various entities as extensions of the state are ordered to propagate religious messages, religious education, and/or discourse on religious solidarity’.

Furthermore, Fox and Sandler (2004: 36–39) not only agree that religion can give greater legitimacy to the regime’s authority itself, but also argue that only by basing itself on a common religious identity will the majority society be voluntarily mobilized to support, and even on many occasions seem to justify a policy that is controversial or difficult to accept in general. However, given the crucial influence that religious elites have, which can effectively steer the common people to support or oppose a regime and policy, Fox and Sandler (2004: 43–44) also acknowledge that if not supervised, this religious diplomacy can be a double-edged sword in the context of international relations.

Therefore, a regime wanting to use religion in its foreign policy not only needs to control the public narrative about its policies, but also ensures support from religious elites to promote its legitimacy and soft power, both in the eyes of the domestic audience and the international community. In its development, the term ‘faith-based diplomacy’ emerged in academic studies to refer to the application of religion in foreign policy. For example, Johnston (2003) used this expression to refer to the inclusion of religious authority and dogma in the resolution of disputes such as the longstanding conflict between Israel and Palestine, the dispute between India and Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir, and the war in Bosnia and Kosovo.

When it comes to China, it has adopted faith diplomacy for many years. Some may think that this concept is in fact very contrary to the communist ideological belief held by the CCP. However, the facts on the ground show that these conditions do not prevent China from being able to apply its religious diplomacy strategy in relation to other countries. In fact, since the 1979 reform and opening up, China's faith diplomacy has increased in speed and scope both at the domestic and international levels. In the domestic context, China adopted faith diplomacy to ensure the CCP's legitimacy and thus it consists of not only regulating worship and charitable services, but also determining which aspects of religion can be included in education and politics (Brasnett, 2021: 44). The main objective is to make the people have high respect for other religions and the CCP's policies towards religions (Xu, 2015: 22–23). On a broader global scope, Zhang (2013: 83) argued that China's faith diplomacy has the objectives of 'promoting international understanding and acceptance of China's religious policies, advocating for China's actions regarding religion, enhancing China's good image, and realizing the mission of building a harmonious world'.

This is based on a statement made by the Director of the Department of Religious Policy of China's State Bureau of Religious Affairs which stated that:

[The party and the government] support China's religions to further build international friendship and promote mutual understanding with foreign peoples and religions, so as to make a contribution to building a harmonious world. [China's religions] should actively propagate the reality of religious freedom in China, and present to the world a positive image of China's religions, so as to decrease misunderstanding in international community and gain their understanding and support of China religious policy and religious work as well as to improve China's national image (Zhang, 2013: 83).

The above passage is relevant to understand how China has implemented various faith diplomacy activities for its own interests. This diplomacy, which is an inter-agency effort coordinated between the State Bureau of Religious Affairs, the Information Office of the State Council, the Ministry of Culture, the Communist Party's Department of United Front Work, as well as the national councils of the religions (ibid.), has been developed according to the context of the country or the community that China wishes to infiltrate. Zhang (2013: 85–91), for instance, has proposed that China has adopted some forms of 'Buddhist diplomacy', 'Jewish diplomacy', and 'Christian diplomacy' depending on the targeted audiences. In the case of Indonesia and the wider Muslim world, I argue, China has used Muslim diplomacy to deepen its influence.

## **2.2. Muslim Diplomacy**

In different religious contexts, China has adopted different faith diplomacy strategies. In the context of the Muslim community, adopting from the notion of faith diplomacy explained above, I would propose the concept of ‘Muslim diplomacy’ as various Islam-related diplomacy endeavours specifically directed towards Muslim communities. Although research on China’s Muslim diplomacy is relatively limited, a number of works have slightly mentioned how China has attempted to co-opt Muslim communities in local and global contexts.

China’s early deployment of Muslim diplomacy concentrated mainly on provinces where there are large Muslim populations, such as the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Yunnan, Gansu, and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Zhang, 2013: 88). As part of its efforts to appease its Muslim communities, Muslim scholars, religious groups, and businesspeople from the aforementioned provinces have travelled to Iran, Tunis, Egypt and Saudi Arabia with the approval and assistance of the Chinese government (*ibid.*). Gresh (2011) used the concept of ‘Hajj diplomacy’ to explain China’s policy to permit Muslims in China to go for the pilgrimage in an effort to improve its positive image among Muslim countries. Chinese provinces have also allowed receiving charitable aid from Islamic countries (Zhang, 2013: 88). As part of an initiative to improve diplomatic relations with Indonesia, in 2010 Muslim artists from Ningxia and Xinjiang were allowed to conduct promotions and to visit the country (*ibid.*).

Muslim diplomacy has also been carried out in various situations, including in China’s communication during crisis. Following the US’ invasions on Iraq in 2003, the Chinese Islamic Association, a state-controlled organization, condemned the decision on behalf of China’s 21 million Muslim populations (*ibid.*). The Chinese government have also employed Muslim diplomacy in relation to the Xinjiang issue. In 2009, following the Urumqi Riots which left over 200 dead, the Chinese government invited four OIC representatives on a visit to Xinjiang (*ibid.*). China also invited the four representatives to a meeting, where they explain how and why the unrest in Xinjiang took place (*ibid.*). In China’s view, this effort is intended to subdue any criticism of its policy towards the Uighurs. With the initiation of the BRI, such efforts have increased and expanded to boost China’s relations with the Muslim countries. Wani (2021) examined how, with the wave of political Islam and mass mobilization that swept through the Muslim world since the Arab Spring forcing many countries in the Middle East to fortify their state-controlled religious discourse, China has employed the same rhetoric to justify its policies in Xinjiang. Greer and Jardine (2020) also noted that in recent years, China has used the Chinese Islamic Association to win the hearts and minds

of the Middle Eastern states. By holding conferences, meetings and visits, the Association is one of China's leading institutions to spread its official narratives and deflect criticism from these countries. Confucius Institutes have also been established across the Muslim world such as the UAE and Lebanon. Not only used to promote Chinese culture and politics, but they have also been employed to dictate a positive narrative and to discredit critical stories about Xinjiang (Wani, 2021).

From these examples, it can be seen that China has used Muslim diplomacy in its ties with the Muslim countries to foster a positive image of itself as a nation that upholds religious freedom and human rights. This has allowed China to discern criticism and even gain global support despite widely reported violations of religious freedom in China. Scholars on religious diplomacy have argued that it can take many forms (Brasnett, 2021). In the context of Indonesia, or perhaps the wider Muslim world, I would like to use the concept of Muslim diplomacy. While Zhang (2013) as well as Rohman and Amaliyah (2019) have used the term 'Islamic diplomacy' in analyzing China's diplomacy towards the Muslim countries, I argue that it is somehow problematic as it in some way implies that this is a kind of diplomacy that is guided by Islamic teachings. The concept of Muslim diplomacy is more relevant to describe China's usage of Islam-related diplomacy targeted towards the Muslim community.

### **3. China's Muslim Diplomacy in Indonesia**

The previous section discussed the concept of faith diplomacy in China's foreign policy and the history of China's use of Muslim diplomacy. This part concentrates on the Muslim diplomacy that China has undertaken in Indonesia. Adopting Zhang (2013: 83), China's Muslim Diplomacy in Indonesia aims to gain people's understanding and support of China's religious policy, which in the context of Indonesia mainly concentrates on Beijing's actions in Xinjiang, and to maintain China's image, which primarily concentrates on promoting the idea that China is a good place to practise Islam.

#### ***3.1. Promoting Positive Narratives to Officials***

The first form of China's Muslim diplomacy in Indonesia is promoting positive narratives to Indonesian officials. With a predominantly Muslim population, China's policy towards Xinjiang has sparked a series of demonstrations in Indonesia. According to the author's research, such protests have been held at least once every year since 2018 (Kapoor, 2018; Karmini, 2019; Rufinaldo, 2021; Serhan, 2022). Among other places, these protests are usually organized in front of the Chinese Embassy to call the government

in Beijing to put an end to their actions or in streets near the Indonesian government offices calling Indonesia to end their ties with China. Responding to these protests, the Chinese Embassy immediately held press conferences and meetings with Indonesian officials, where they affirmed that China had provided basic rights for Muslims in Xinjiang, including their right to religion (Brasnett, 2021: 51). Following reports from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute that China had destroyed thousands of mosques in Xinjiang, the then Chinese Ambassador to Indonesia, Xiao Qian, made visits to several mosques and met with Muslim communities in an effort to rebuke the report (*ibid.*). He mentioned that news about mosques being destroyed in Xinjiang and Uighurs being detained in concentration camps are only rumours and slanders and asserted that Western countries such as Australia and the US have deliberately raised the Uighur issue to increase anti-China sentiment for their political interests (*ibid.*).

The issue of Xinjiang has also been discussed during meetings with Indonesian political elites. One of those took place during the visit of Indonesian parliamentary members to Beijing to meet with the Chinese government (Aswar et al., 2022: 66). During the meeting, it was claimed that freedom of religion in Xinjiang is fully protected and everyone can practise their religion freely. In another meeting with Indonesian officials and religious scholars, Xiao also mentioned that news on China's repressive measures against Uighur Muslims are not valid. Although he admitted that there are problems in Xinjiang, they are currently being handled by the government. He also invited the Indonesian people to see the 'real condition' of Uighurs in China. On another occasion, Xiao recited the classic story of Chinese Muslim sailor, Zheng He, who travelled to Indonesia and formed ties between the two countries and narrating his own links to Islam by citing a 1300-year-old mosque in his hometown of Taiyuan (Brasnett, 2021). He also ensured to inform that while many Muslims in China support the government, a few portions of Uighurs have entered the fold of extremism and attempted to form separatist movements, which has left China with no option but to initiate policies to protect its unity (*ibid.*). A similar effort was also made after the visit of Seyit Turturk, president of East Turkestan National Council based in Istanbul, and Gulbakkhar Cililova, an Uighur from Kazakhstan, to speak about the evidence that Uighurs were being detained in concentration camps. Soon after the event, Xiao Qian made a sudden visit to the then deputy spokesman in the People's Representative Council, Fahri Hamzah. Nonetheless, Hamzah was adamant that China's Xinjiang policy was a human rights issue and therefore the Indonesian government should not be afraid to speak out (Anwar and Jones, 2019).

While Indonesia's economic dependency on China holds a crucial sway, these efforts appear to have made some Indonesian officials turn a



blind eye. Following his meeting with the Chinese Ambassador, Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs, Mahfud MD posted a tweet regarding his stance towards Uighurs: 'I often go to China and see many mosques, halal restaurants and Muslim people, [they are] safe' (*CNN Indonesia*, 2019, December 24). Similarly, in a press statement after a meeting with the Chinese Ambassador in December 2019, Chief of Staff of Presidency, Moeldoko, commented on the Xinjiang issue that: "Every country has the sovereignty to regulate its citizens. So the Indonesian government does not interfere in China's domestic affairs" (Prasetya, 2019).

### **3.2. Cooperating with Muslim Organizations**

Beijing's reported campaigns of mass detention, political indoctrination and forced assimilation of the Uighurs have also attracted the attention of Islamic organizations in Indonesia, especially the country's two largest Muslim organizations – namely Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama (NU). In December 2018, for instance, Muhammadiyah issued an open letter condemning Beijing's attitudes towards the Uighurs and asked the Chinese government for an explanation (*KLIKMU*, 2018). On several occasions, NU has also stated that Beijing's treatment of the Uighur is a form of human rights violation (Prihantoro, 2019).

As China realized that the situation could exacerbate long-held anti-China sentiments in Indonesia and impact its economic interests in the country, it has employed Muslim diplomacy towards Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations to co-opt their narratives on Xinjiang and Islam. China's Muslim diplomacy towards these organizations began in 2016 during the active implementation of the BRI (Rohman and Amaliyah, 2019: 73). This has three main components.

The first is framing its Xinjiang policy in the context of terrorism and separatism and forming a narrative that China is an ally to the Muslim world. In 2018, responding to several protests against China's Xinjiang policy, Xiao Qian, visited offices of NU and Muhammadiyah (*Indhie*, 2018). At the NU headquarters, he claimed that China was being scapegoated by unnamed countries about its policy towards the Uygurs and that re-education camps were intended to increase their work and Chinese language skills (*ibid.*). Meanwhile, in front of Muhammadiyah leaders, he asserted that China is a better ally to the Muslim world than the West. For many years, China has supported the Palestinian issue in the UN Security Council and has never invaded Muslim countries (Murphy, 2020).

Secondly, China has also invited members of these organizations to visit China, including Xinjiang. After Muhammadiyah issued an open letter in February 2019 criticizing China's Xinjiang policy, China invited top

clerics of NU, Muhammadiyah, and the Council of Ulama Indonesia (MUI) on tours of the Xinjiang camps to witness the conditions of the Uighurs (Tisnadibrata, 2019). It was reported that during the visit Chinese authorities gave presentations on terrorist attacks by Uighurs and invited these clerics to pray at local mosques (Anwar and Jones, 2019). The visitors were also invited to visit camps, where they were told that students receive training in Chinese language, animal husbandry, and hotel management. 2019 was not the first time China invited Muslim figures to China (ibid.). After the Kunming attacks in 2014, the state-backed Chinese Islamic Associations invited Islamic scholars from Indonesia and other countries to an Islamic conference in Xinjiang (Wani, 2021). A similar effort also occurred in 2016 after news circulated in Indonesia that China prohibits Uighurs to observe fasting during Ramadan and two Indonesian Islamic political parties, the Prosperous Justice Party and the United Development Party, issued statements condemning China's restrictions on the Uighurs' religious freedom. In the visit, the five visitors were invited to meetings with senior Uighur religious scholars and to visit mosques in Xinjiang (Emont, 2016). It was reported that while the visitors, who were NU members, were skeptical of China's narrative when they arrived and unsure if they have received the complete story, they appeared to have been convinced (ibid.). Bina Suhendra, NU's chief treasurer, said after the visit that: "The [Chinese] state guarantees freedom of religion to all religions" (ibid.).

The third component is offering donations and collaborating on specific projects. The former has been prevalent towards NU, while the latter has been used towards Muhammadiyah. China had inked a number of agreements with NU on assistance for poverty eradication, health and education (Anwar and Jones, 2019). Officials from the Chinese Embassy also regularly visit NU, especially during the month of Ramadhan (ibid.). In 2015, for example, the Chinese Embassy donated US\$7,000 for NU orphanages (ibid.). In 2018, it also funded the building of sanitation facilities in NU-dominated villages in West Java (ibid.). In the meantime, Muhammadiyah had agreements with China for partnership between Muhammadiyah-owned hospitals and universities with Chinese counterparts (Ilmie, 2017).

China's efforts to approach these organizations have been fruitful. Several NU's figures, such as Yahya Cholil Staquf, NU's chairman, have asked Indonesians not to criticize China on the Uighur issue. Other figures of NU have also echoed Chinese narratives on Xinjiang. For instance, the former NU's chairman and its leading figure, Said Aqil Siradj, claimed that China guarantees the freedom of its people including their religion. Siradj argues:

I've been there (China). Many have been there, religious leaders witnessed how mosques were built, Imams were paid a fair salary. Prayers, recitations

are allowed as long as they are not outside the mosque (*CNN Indonesia*, 2019, July 17).

Siradj further said that during his visit to China he had stopped by the house of Haji Muhammad, a Chinese Muslim who told the story that the condition of Muslims in China today is better compared to before (Maksum, 2018). Even Chinese Muslims are said to have received support in spreading the religion of Islam, as long as they do not disturb public order. In line with Beijing's narratives, he claimed that the Xinjiang issue is a separatism issue, whereby he called the Indonesian government not to interfere with China's domestic affairs (*ibid.*).

This kind of view has also been expressed in various forums. Siradj, at an event held by NU in July 2019 said:

I've been to Xinjiang. The mosque is beautiful. I also met my friend in Chengdu. There, when praying in the mosque, the congregation bursts out of the courtyard (Basuki, 2019, July 20).

Then, when answering reporters' questions about the oppression in Uighurs, Siradj said:

The issue of torture is in the past. Xinjiang is very good, really. The current situation is that several Uighur combatants were arrested by our police for joining an Indonesian terrorist group (*ibid.*).

An appreciative attitude towards China's policies in Xinjiang was also conveyed by an NU leading figure, Imron Rosyadi Hamid who explains that the Xinjiang issue cannot be linked to anti-Islam policy (Ilmie, 2018). He emphasized that what the Chinese government is doing is to prevent the separatist movement (*ibid.*). Echoing Chinese official narrative, Hamid claimed that China's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, including Islam. Muslim life in China, outside of Xinjiang, live happily and peacefully (*ibid.*).

Compared to NU, Muhammadiyah appeared to be more openly critical of China when it alleged that the 2019 visit was choreographed (Rakhmat, 2022, January 31). This position is based on reports by some Western media – that is, the organizations' representatives were not taken to the 'real camps' where the Uighurs were being held and were made to believe that the so-called re-education camps were intended to provide job training and to combat extremism (Emont, 2019). Although Beijing has denied such claims, organizations such as Human Rights have also reported that the visit was orchestrated (Wang and Harsono, 2020). Despite this, a recent peer-reviewed study reveals that there has been a shifting of views among Muhammadiyah members in their social media activities from being critical of China to show a more positive image of China, including its Xinjiang policy (Fadillah and Jandevi, 2020: 57–61). Moreover, one of the invited visitors to China from

Muhammadiyah, Agung Danarto, who is the organization's secretary also said after returning to Indonesia that:

The camps are great, there [the students] are given life-skills training, and so forth. They get lessons in agriculture, restaurant operation, cooking and automotive repair (Eckert, 2019).

The view of these Muslim organizations is crucial in Indonesia. These organizations, which collectively have 100 million followers, have considerable sway to influence public opinion (Fansuri, 2022). Moreover, they have strong ties with the government, given the fact that many of their members are also prominent government officials (Jung, 2014). For example, NU's Deputy Secretary-General, Masduki Baidlowi, is the spokesperson for the current Vice President Ma'ruf Amin. In 2019, he issued a statement arguing that Indonesia's soft approach on the Xinjiang issue is the right way (Amindoni, 2019). It is thus plausible that these organizations' uncritical view can be one major reason behind Jakarta's silence on the Xinjiang issue.

There are, however, other factors that may contribute to the results of China's Muslim diplomacy towards Muslim organizations. Indonesia's growing economic dependency on China may be one factor. As mentioned earlier, China has through the BRI become Indonesia's second-largest foreign investor and top trading partner. For Muslim organizations in Indonesia, staying silent on the Xinjiang issue serves two purposes: maintaining their ties with the government, which has strong relations with Beijing, and sustaining their own cooperation with China. Their relative silence on the Xinjiang issue could also be related to Indonesia's counter-terrorism efforts, which these organizations have pledged to support. While small in number, there have been Uighurs involved in radical movements in Indonesia (Anwar and Jones, 2019). For all its efforts, China's Muslim diplomacy towards Indonesia's Muslim organizations appears to have achieved the rare feat of walking on water and silenced these organizations' critics of its Xinjiang policy. As long as the Indonesian government sees benefits in its ties with China and maintains relations with these organizations, it is not likely that the latter would turn critical towards China.

### ***3.3. Providing Scholarships to Santris and Cooperating with Islamic Academic Institutions***

Another important part of China's Muslim diplomacy in Indonesia is courting Muslim students, known as "Santri", with scholarships to ensure that its policies and image are seen from the perspective of China alone. China has been offering scholarships to Indonesians for years (Rakhmat, 2019). However, the more active targeting of the Santri community is very recent.

It follows the implementation of BRI and news about China's discrimination against the Uighurs. Although precise data are difficult to find, it is reported that China is the second top destination for Indonesian students (Rakhmat, 2022, March 17). The latest data in 2019 from the Indonesian Embassy in Beijing recorded 15,780 Indonesians studying in China (ibid.). These scholarships have taken many forms, although most students receive the Chinese Government Scholarship (CGS) (*MAJT*, 2017). The most important is the one provided to NU, to allow NU-affiliated students to pursue education in China. These students are spread across several Chinese universities. As their number increased, they even founded the NU China chapter (*PCINU Tiongkok*) (Rohman, 2019).

These Santris also organize various events in China such as webinars and book launches. One example was on Santri Day in 2020, when *PCINU Tiongkok* held a webinar on the roles of Santri in strengthening China-Indonesia relations (Rusdiyah, 2020). Students also frequently attend Beijing-orchestrated events such as the Xinjiang Brief Forum (Zuhri, 2021). The forum was specifically designed to invite Muslims outside China and advise them on how to communicate the Xinjiang issue to their respective communities. During the events, students agreed that the Xinjiang issue needs to be seen "comprehensively", choosing not to believe Western media reports (ibid.). *PCINU Tiongkok* was also invited to the China-Indonesia Symposium on Islamic Culture in Quanzhou in Wuhan in 2019 and 2020 (ibid.). The event was hosted by the Fujian government together with Huaqiao University and the China-Indonesia People-to-People Exchange Development Forum. It is a forum for sharing the views of academics, practitioners and officials on how to improve China-Indonesia relations.

This effort of providing scholarship to Santris seems to have brought some results. Some of these students are now writing in local media to promote the idea that religious freedom is ensured in China. They are associating the Xinjiang region with insurgency as China does. In March 2021, for instance, the vice president of *PCINU Tiongkok* and student at Central China Normal University (CCNU) published an opinion article asserting that "Islam in China is relatively developed" and suggesting that the Xinjiang issue should not be viewed from Western perspective (Zuhri, 2021). The same point of view was also written by another CCNU student in Indonesian newspaper *Jawa Pos* (Musyafak, 2021). A former Santri at one of the Islamic boarding school in East Java, he wrote about his positive experiences as a Muslim living in China.

Another interesting example is a commentary entitled 'Uighur dan Pemboikotan Olimpiade Beijing' ('The Uighurs and the Boycott of the Beijing Olympics'), by Novi Basuki, a Santri who was awarded an arts scholarship by the Chinese government to study at Huaqiao University in Fujian province,

where he focused on Chinese language and culture for three years and a scholarship from Xiamen University, where he obtained his master's degree, and received his doctorate in international relations at Sun Yat-sen University (Suryadinata, 2022). In the article that was reprinted in some other media, he noted that the US, the UK, Canada and Australia have declared diplomatic boycotts of this year's Beijing Winter Olympics because of China's "genocide" of the Uighurs in Xinjiang (Basuki, 2021, December 20). He claimed this is incorrect, citing figures from China to demonstrate that the Uighur population in Xinjiang was 8.34 million in 2018, and 11.62 million in 2020 (*ibid.*). In other words, Uighurs' fertility rate was 1.71%, as contrasted with the lower figure of only 0.83% for the Han ethnic group. He asserted that considering these figures, the allegations of genocide against Uighurs was 'baseless' (*ibid.*). He also claimed that the diplomatic boycott by the US and its allies goes against the spirit of the Olympics, because 'Olympism' represents friendship and justice; as for human rights, he contended that participating in the sports event was also a form of 'human rights' (*ibid.*). Basuki is not alone. Fadillah and Jandevi (2020: 51) also found that, from their social media activities, views of China among Muhammadiyah students attending Chinese universities tend to be positive and affirmative of Chinese narratives.

Another interesting exemplification is a YouTube channel *Asumsi*, which has a program called 'Cha Guan', which in English means 'tea shop'. The show aims to broadcast 'anything about China and its relevance to Indonesia' and hosted by a number of Indonesian graduates of Chinese universities, including Basuki, informing the public about China in a positive light. One video talks about how China treats its Uighur community well and how China acts according to the teachings of Islam. It is difficult to deny that the activities of these graduates in spreading positive messages about China contribute to Beijing's Muslim diplomacy in Indonesia. The NU-led news website, *NU Online*, run mainly by Santris also repeatedly publishes articles that seem to paint a picture of a peaceful and comfortable life for Muslims living in China. One article states that 'Uighurs are free to worship' (Muchlishon, 2019).

In addition, there are also short-term scholarships. In 2019, for instance, Beijing offered scholarships to Santris for a visit to Xinjiang to see the lives of Muslims in the regions (Ulum, 2019). China has also collaborated with Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to send several Indonesian students to visit China in the 'Santri for World Peace, Goes to China' program (*Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia*, 2019). During the program, these students are invited to meet representatives of various state-led institutions, including the Chinese Islamic Association (CIA), to hear the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) version of the 'Islam in China' story (*ibid.*). On a visit in 2019, for example, CIA's leading

figure claimed the relationship between Chinese Muslims and the Chinese government was very good (Rakhmat, 2022, March 17). Earlier in 2013, around 60 Santris from Ar-Risalah Islamic boarding school in East Java were invited to attend a summer school in Hangzhou (ibid.). Nurul Jadid Islamic boarding school in Central Java also reported that a number of its students had received scholarships to study in China (Mulyasari and Lamijo, 2021).

Over the years, China has said it will continue to provide scholarships to Indonesian Muslim students. Last year, for instance, the Ningxia Autonomous Region promoted its scholarship program to the Indonesian Santri community under the banner 'Graduates from Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia can study technology and business at Ningxia University' (Ilmie, 2021, July 7). These scholarships are not only being promoted by Chinese representatives, but also by alumni through seminars and conferences. Some of these are held in mosques and Islamic universities (Rakhmat, 2022, March 17). In 2017, for instance, a seminar entitled 'Seek Knowledge until China' was held at the Central Java Grand Mosque. The speakers were an alumnus of Huazhong Agriculture University and Nanchang University, who spoke about living and studying in China as a Muslim (MAJT, 2017).

As part of this educational segment of China's Muslim diplomacy in Indonesia, China has also established cooperation with Islamic educational institutions in the country. Making education a means of public diplomacy to introduce Chinese culture and to gain acceptance among the Indonesian society has been part of China's diplomacy since the beginning of its ties with Indonesia (Rakhmat, 2019). In recent years, however, China has attempted to get closer cooperation with Islamic institutions. Confucius Institutes, which are CCP-owned institutions aimed at spreading Chinese culture and teaching Chinese language around the world, have been established in partnership with Islamic universities such as Universitas Al Azhar Indonesia in 2010 and Muhammadiyah University of Malang (Amelia and Isyana, 2016: 11), alongside with other Indonesian universities. Activities of these institutions include not only teaching Chinese language but also teaching Chinese politics and values, organizing China-related cultural events and conducting student and lecturer exchanges to China (ibid.). Through these institutions, China has been able to penetrate Indonesian secondary and primary schools. One example comes from Confucius Institute at Universitas Hasanuddin which has partnered with Athira Islamic School in Makassar (Theo and Leung, 2018: 8).

A number of Islamic higher institutions in Indonesia have also been approached by China to establish partnership with their Chinese counterparts. In April 2017, Guanxi University for Nationalities, along with the ASEAN Nanyang Foundation, signed an agreement with Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia (Unusia) on student and faculty exchanges, as well as in the teaching of 'moderate Islam' (Niam, 2017). A year later, the embassy announced new

scholarships for UNUSIA students to study in China (Muchlishon, 2018). In addition, Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta has signed a cooperation agreement with Beijing Education Institute for International Exchange (BEIIE), a non-profit organization under the Chinese government (Setiawan, 2019). The agreement involves 10 universities in China and includes joint research between universities, sending lecturers for doctoral studies, and exchange of students and professors (*ibid.*). In addition to UIN Sunan Kalijaga, UIN Walisongo Semarang has also engaged in educational collaborations with 23 Chinese universities in 2019 (Fathuddin, 2019). Other universities include UIN Surabaya with the Chinese Consulate General, UIN Ar-Raniry Aceh with Huazhong University of Science and Technology, and Universitas Islam Indonesia with Nanjing Xiaozhuang University. In their study on the implementation of agreements between Confucius Institutes and Universitas Al-Azhar Indonesia as well as Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Amelia and Isyana, (2016: 11) affirm that activities such as student-faculty exchanges and cultural events have become platforms for China to spread its own narratives that it respects Islam and protects its Muslim citizens.

### ***3.4. Expanding Media Strategies***

Beyond education, China's Muslim diplomacy in Indonesia also involves media propaganda. In many parts of the world, China has expanded its media influence globally to support its growing clout. Beijing is dispersing its version of information through content-sharing deals under media partnership, censorship and training of foreign journalists (Cook, 2021). China employs these strategies to amplify narratives in line with the CCP's interests, especially in countries where China has high stakes. There are several media strategies that China adopts as part of its Muslim diplomacy in Indonesia.

The first strategy is expanding the physical presence of its media and the use of social media. In recent years, a number of Chinese media have established their branch offices in Indonesia, such as Hi Indo! Channel owned by China Central Television (CCTV) and PT. Elnet Media Bersama directed at young audiences, and Xinhua, China's largest state news agency (Amirio, 2015). This physical expansion is intended to ease their operations, especially in recruiting Indonesian journalists and staff members to ensure 'China's stories' are spread in the local language. Some of these media also have social media accounts in Bahasa Indonesia. The most crucial example is Xinhua, which has a Twitter account in Bahasa Indonesia with 64,400 followers (Han and Rakhmat, 2022). China Radio International (CRI)'s Indonesian Service also has a Facebook page in Bahasa with 185,000 followers. While this number of followers is lower compared to other foreign media such as the US' Voice of America with 324,000 followers, these Bahasa Indonesia versions of



Chinese media's social media account would allow Chinese Communist Party (CCP) narratives to be conveyed properly in Indonesia. Xinhua's Indonesian Twitter feeds, for example, often contain news on the visit of an Indonesian politician to Xinjiang and the positive comments he made about the place and the peaceful state of Islam in China.

China's use of social media in its diplomacy in Indonesia has indeed increased in recent years. The recent decision of Lu Kang, China's newly appointed ambassador to Indonesia, to begin his appointment by opening a Twitter account and tweeting a greeting to Indonesian citizens, exemplifies this phenomenon (Mulyanto, 2022). Globally, China has used Twitter as a platform for its diplomacy, a practice recently conceptualized as 'Twiplomacy'. A report by the London School of Economics revealed that official Chinese Twitter activity has increased markedly in recent years (Alden and Chan, 2021). Even though almost all countries have some form of presence, China's use of Twitter, which is blocked inside the country, is relatively new. As a matter of fact, the Chinese Foreign Ministry only opened its Twitter account in 2018. While the previous Chinese Ambassador to Indonesia, Xiao Qian, who served from December 2017 to November 2021, did not have a notable social media presence, Ambassador Lu decided to open a Twitter account in April soon after presenting his credentials to President Joko Widodo. Having already amassed 33,000 followers, Lu has used his Twitter to highlight the positive progress in China-Indonesia relations, in Chinese, English and Bahasa Indonesia. From some of his tweets, it appears that the Twitter account has also been employed by the Ambassador to contribute to China's Muslim diplomacy in Indonesia. Lu, for example, tweeted about his visit to an Islamic boarding school (*Pesantren*) to speak about the close ties between Chinese and Indonesian Muslims. He also wrote about how peaceful Islam in China is. Of course, prior to Lu Kang joining Twitter, China's use of social media in its Muslim diplomacy in Indonesia has already seen some progress. Even though Chinese embassies and consulates in Indonesia do not have official Twitter accounts, official figures present in Indonesia are very active on Twitter. One of them is Chinese ambassador to ASEAN, Deng Xijun, who is based in Jakarta. On his official account, besides tweeting about his activities, Deng frequently spreads Beijing's narratives such as how "Xinjiang is a target of US smear campaign" and the positive developments that Beijing claims have taken place in Xinjiang.

The government in Beijing seems to realize that the use of social media has never been more important than today with its increasing presence in Indonesia. Social media offers China the opportunity to reach Indonesian audiences in a fast and effective manner. For instance, currently, Indonesia belongs to the top five countries in the world with the highest number of

Twitter users (Dixon, 2022). This strategy would allow China to monitor Indonesian public opinion and engage in public debates. On Twitter, for example, through the use of hashtags, Chinese accounts are able to make sure that for certain topics, such as #Xinjiang, their tweets will feature prominently. At the same time, using just 280 characters, China is able to spread its messages in a direct and straightforward manner.

The second strategy is inviting Indonesian journalists to China and cooperating with Indonesian media. In the past few years, China has actively invited foreign journalists to the country to supply them with its own version of information and to encourage them to circulate the information to Indonesian audience. In 2019, the Indonesian Journalists Association was invited to attend the Belt Road Initiative Journalists Forum conference organized by CCP-affiliated All China Journalist Association (ACJA) (Han and Rakhmat, 2022). Sponsored by the China Communications University and China International Radio, the cooperation covers journalist exchange, journalist training, joint reporting and academic activities (ibid.). Upon returning, one journalist from the Muslim-majority province Lombok wrote a piece in a local newspaper, praising China and its press freedom (*Radar Lombok*, 2019). In 2018, ACJA also cooperated with the Indonesian Journalists Association (PWI) to create a prize for Indonesian journalists writing on the BRI, incentivizing local journalists to write pro-China stories (Han and Rakhmat, 2022).

Related to this, it was reported that Indonesian journalists have received complaints from the Chinese government when they write articles that are not in line with the Chinese narratives. For example, Bayu Hermawan, a journalist for the Indonesian newspaper *Republika*, received a WhatsApp message from one of the Chinese Embassy officials in Jakarta asserting that an article he wrote concerning a 2019 China-invited tour to Xinjiang has errors and that he did not properly narrate the positive aspects of his trip (Emont, 2019). Hermawan's articles cited residents in one of the re-education camps in Xinjiang who asserted that they were not given trials or were jailed for offences such as eating *halal* foods (ibid.). Besides inviting journalists to China, China has additionally funded tours for social media influencers from Indonesia. Based on a report by Tenggara Statistics, an Indonesian investment consultancy institute that organized the tours, these influencers were paid US\$500 per day. One of the participants was the former Miss Indonesia, Alya Nurshabrina (ibid.), who, upon returning from the tour, posted a now-deleted photo of a mosque outside Beijing with a caption 'China welcomes every religion' (Han and Rakhmat, 2022). In October 2020, Nurshabrina also uploaded several photos exhibiting her positive experiences in China and created a competition in which she asked her followers to share their memories in China (ibid.).

Chinese media entities have also established ties with their Indonesian counterparts to support its content-sharing strategies. This strategy enables Chinese state media contents to circulate widely, reaching Indonesian audiences through local media. This has been established with *The Jakarta Post*, where content from Chinese media such as Xinhua and *China Daily*, which is owned by the CCP's Publicity Department, are being reposted (ibid.). *The Post* also publishes writings by Chinese ambassadors (ibid.). In addition, Xinhua has also signed a partnership agreement with Indonesia's state news agency Antara and local broadcaster, MetroTV, which has led these two large media organizations in Indonesia to broadcast more positive and less critical coverage of China (Wahyudi, 2019). Freedom House reported that Antara journalists in Beijing frequently write articles that parrot Chinese media points of view, including on Xinjiang (Han and Rakhmat, 2022). In April 2021, Antara also published a two-series story on how Muslim holidays are spent in China (Ilmie, 2021, April 25), and had published a special report of Xinjiang's re-educational camps that essentially repeating China's propaganda that the camps aimed to eradicate terrorism (Ilmie, 2021, June 3). CRI also broadcasts on the Jakarta-based FM news radio station Elshinta in Bahasa, one of the top radio stations in the country (Han and Rakhmat, 2022). Research from the *British Journal of Chinese Studies* also confirms several Indonesian media outlets, which frequently repost Chinese media reports in recent years, often publish news with positive narratives (Febrica and Sudarman, 2018: 106–107).

Another strategy is censorship. China has also gradually carried out efforts to censor anti-China information in Indonesia. In August 2020, Reuters reported that Chinese tech firm ByteDance had censored articles critical of the Chinese government on Indonesian Baca Berita (BaBe) news aggregator app, which is used by millions in Indonesia (Potkin, 2020). The censorship was based on instructions from the company's Beijing headquarters. The restricted content reportedly included references to 'Xinjiang', 'Tiananmen' and 'Mao Zedong', as well as to China-Indonesia tensions over the South China Sea (ibid.). Conflicting reports from the company and sources cited in the article claimed that the moderation rules became less restrictive in either 2019 or mid-2020 (Kelly, 2020). Censorship also takes place in ByteDance-own app, TikTok, which is one of the most downloaded apps in Indonesia. Freedom House reported that there have been some cases of TikTok removing contents that are considered sensitive in the Chinese censorship guidelines (Han and Rakhmat, 2022). In early 2021, the Chinese government censorship agency also blocked Indonesian newspaper site *JawaPos* in several regions in China such as Beijing, Shenzhen, Inner Mongolia and Yunnan province (Guest, 2021). *JawaPos* said that this was allegedly due to China's sensitivity to criticism of the CCP (ibid.). It also relates to human rights violations of the Uighurs (Puspaningrum, 2021).

#### 4. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that China, in its relationship with Indonesia, has adopted Muslim diplomacy with two objectives, namely to craft a positive image of itself as a country that has the respect of Islam and to prevent criticism from the Indonesian Muslim community towards the human rights situation in China. China's Muslim diplomacy in Indonesia consists of four elements. First, promoting positive narratives about its Xinjiang policy to Indonesian officials through official meetings and visits. Second, it also involves cooperating with Muslim organizations to influence these organizations' perceptions of China's policy towards Islam, by inviting prominent figures of these organizations to visit China, specifically Xinjiang, and by providing funds and to the organizations' activities and programs. Third, offering scholarships to Santris and cooperating with Islamic academic institutions. Lastly, China's Muslim diplomacy in Indonesia also consists of media efforts to control the circulation of information on China, its stance towards Islam, and the Xinjiang issue. This media endeavour comprises several aspects, namely expanding the physical presence of its media and the use of social media, inviting journalists and social media influencers to visit China and to write positive stories about the visits, content-sharing agreements, and censorship of information that are not in line with the Chinese official propaganda.

Although relatively recent, China's Muslim diplomacy appears to have brought some results. This can be seen from the views and narratives of the audiences targeted by China. As shown throughout the article, some Indonesian government officials, top figures and members of Muslim organizations, and Santris are now agreeing and even voicing Chinese narratives on issues such as China's policy towards Xinjiang and the conditions of Muslims living in China. It is, however, crucial to note that this article does not dispute that Indonesia's economic dependence on China is the core factor behind its hesitation to condemn the Chinese government's treatment of Uighurs. But it aims to highlight China's Muslim diplomacy efforts, which should be acknowledged in order to have the complete picture.

In the coming years, as the ties between China and Indonesia are expected to grow, the former is likely to continue and expand its Muslim diplomacy. Public perceptions of China in Indonesia have not been very positive. Based on a survey conducted by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in July 2022 which interviewed 1,600 respondents of various genders, ages, regions, ethnicities and religions, there is a decline in the public's positive feelings towards China compared to five years ago (Negara and Suryadinata, 2022). The survey also found that positive feelings towards China among Indonesian people only reached 66%, compared to 76.7% five years ago (*ibid.*). One of

the major reasons for the declining view is China's policy towards Xinjiang (Walden, 2019). In this context, as long as China persists in its treatment of Xinjiang, the potential for this issue to roll in Indonesia and to negatively affect China's footholds in Indonesia, will continue. While cooperation on various fronts is expected to grow, positive public perceptions are also important to ensure the continuity of the ties between the two countries. Therefore, there is a high likelihood that China will continue to employ Muslim diplomacy in its engagement with Indonesia. Such efforts could be expanded from its current forms.

Against this background, further research needs to be conducted to continuously analyze the development of China's Muslim diplomacy in Indonesia in the coming years. This article also provides relevant insights into the discussion about China's diplomacy and soft power, particularly in the Muslim world. It would be interesting to compare these findings concerning Indonesia with other Muslim countries. While it has been reported that the Muslim world has remained silent or even has refused to condemn China's policy towards the Xinjiang issue, most of the analyses rely on the readily available explanation that it is these countries' economic dependence on China. There are limited studies available on the efforts employed by China in winning the hearts and minds of these Muslim countries. Hence, adopting the notion of Muslim diplomacy in other contexts could help fill the gap in the lacuna.

### **Acknowledgement**

This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2021S1A5 C2A 01087076).

### **Note**

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