



Chinese network power and patronage embeddedness in Indonesia

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Abstract

Although primarily economic in nature, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is often perceived as an economic instrument aimed at enhancing China's geopolitical objectives. Despite the evident deployment of China's geoeconomic strategy through the BRI, why does Indonesia continue to engage with the BRI? This paper aims to advance the discussion by shifting focus toward the implications of the BRI on the domestic political dynamics of Southeast Asian countries. It argues that Indonesia's inability to perceive the BRI as a Chinese geoeconomic strategy stems from the initiative's capacity to forge a new kind of regionalism. This new regionalism is characterized by the creation of network power, which strategically aligns local oligarchies and conglomerates with Chinese geopolitical interests. In a country like Indonesia, with deeply embedded patronage relations, such co-optation is an effective way to influence the decision-making process. In light of this, this paper conceptualizes the notion of patronage embeddedness to elucidate how Chinese foreign capital embeds itself within local political and economic networks to secure its interests through existing patronage relationships. Through this notion, our conceptualization not only shifts the narrative from a one-sided portrayal of Chinese agency but also highlights a dual agency scenario where Chinese capital and local oligarchs engage in a mutually beneficial relationship. Although this relationship offers advantages to both parties, it does not necessarily align with the broader interests of the Indonesian populace.

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Introduction

China's expanding influence is increasingly evident across the globe, particularly in Southeast Asia, a region that perceives China's rise both as a geopolitical threat and an economic opportunity. Security studies scholars assert that China's growing power will lead to greater assertiveness toward its neighbors leading to more intensified geopolitical tensions (Goodman 2017; Fravel 2011). This trend is most observed in the South China Sea, a major site where China's territorial ambitions are most contested. Literature on regional integration, on the other hand, tends to view China's rise favorably, highlighting the potential benefits of a rising China for the region. Southeast Asia, a region with many nations rich in commodities, is highly connected with China due to the latter being the largest market and source of investments (Ba 2014; Bi 2021). However, this economic interdependence is increasingly mobilized for geopolitical gains. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, epitomizes this merging of economic and geopolitical agendas that showcasing how China's global economic policies are linked with its broader strategic objectives (Flint and Zhu 2019). As a result, the compartmentalized view of China's influence is becoming increasingly untenable due to the nuanced interplay between economic cooperation and geopolitical strategies.

The BRI has been broadly interpreted in two contrasting lights. First, the agenda is seen as a benign economic development strategy that uses infrastructure projects to boost regional and global trade. This initiative was designed to facilitate the cross-continental flow of capital, commodities, labor, and resources, which simultaneously serves as a spatial fix for China's problem of industrial overcapacity (Summers 2016; Blanchard and Flint 2017). However, others see it as a strategic maneuver to extend China's geopolitical influence, particularly in Southeast Asia, where it has, to some extent, intensified competition with the United States. This is because, as China's influence grows, it increasingly appears to leverage the BRI to dominate the region and integrate Southeast Asia into its economic orbit. This growing economic assertiveness, coupled with militarization in the South China Sea, is perceived by many local policy elites as a significant threat. Public sentiment reflects this tension: a majority of Indonesians see China's maritime activities as a direct threat to national sovereignty, with many advocating for a defense alliance among Southeast Asian nations (M. F. Karim, Rahman, and Suwarno 2024). Similarly, public opinion in the Philippines has increasingly identified China as the country's greatest threat due to rising tensions in the disputed waters (Chao 2021). Moreover, the economic impact of China's regional activities has also stoked controversy, particularly in terms of trade dynamics. The influx of Chinese goods has led to significant disruptions in local industries, such as those in Indonesia, where many small businesses struggle to compete (Marks 2015).

This paper aims to advance the discussion by shifting focus toward the implications of BRI in the domestic political dynamics of Southeast Asian countries. It argues that the apparent inability of Southeast Asian countries' elites to treat the

BRI as a geoeconomic strategy, rather than merely an economic agenda, stems from the initiative's capacity to forge a new kind of regionalism. This new regionalism is characterized by the creation of network power, which strategically aligns local oligarchies and conglomerates with Chinese geopolitical interests.

To illustrate this argument, the paper examines Indonesia which presents an interesting case within Southeast Asia due to its significant economic size, large population, and huge territory. Indonesia's foreign policy, historically rooted in the principle of "*Bebas-aktif*" (independent and active), emphasizes non-alignment and active engagement without favoring any major power. Yet, despite this stance and the growing influence of China's BRI, there has been a notable absence of active measures from Indonesia to counterbalance China's expansion (Kipgen 2021). This might superficially appear to align with President Joko Widodo's inward-looking developmental strategy during his tenure from 2014 to 2024, coinciding with the initiation of the BRI. However, this perspective misses the deeper economic and political transformations occurring within the country.

This paper posits that the relationship between Indonesia and China's BRI can be better understood through the lens of patronage embeddedness. This concept elucidates how Chinese network power strategically aligns with and exploits pre-existing patron-client structures in host countries. Unlike traditional forms of network power that emphasize on the use of investment, developmental aid, and loan as well as the penetration of supplier networks and the creation of a system of production alliances to forge a more interconnectedness and cooperative regional development (Katzenstein and Shiraishi 1997), patronage embeddedness highlights a more nuanced dynamic where foreign capital embeds itself within local political and economic networks to secure its interests through existing patronage relationships. Chinese investments, particularly through initiatives like the BRI, have not only pursued economic gain but also have enabled it to position themselves within these patronage networks. As a result, the implication of Chinese investment through BRI project should not be seen in terms of economic per se but also a political one, especially in how these projects align Chinese capital with Indonesian oligarchs. The contribution of this paper lies in its refined conceptualization of network power as not only a means of economic integration but also a tool for embedding foreign capital within the socio-political fabric of host nations. By integrating the concept of patronage embeddedness, the paper highlights how Chinese (state) capital utilizes existing local structures to forge a type of regionalism that serves both the economic interests of China and the political interests of local elites.

The rise of China and new network regionalism

Since the early 2000s, scholars have shown that ASEAN has become a central force in Asian regionalism, primarily in driving regional integration (Stubbs 2002; Besson 2019). Historically, scholarly literature on Asian regionalism has categorized ASEAN-centered regional integration under two principal agendas: political-security and economic. In the realm of political-security, ASEAN's commitment to soft institutionalism and a principle of non-interference has often been seen as a strength

that allowing ASEAN to foster a flexible form of cooperation instead of a more rigid, formalized governance structure (Dent, 2008). The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), for instance, exemplifies ASEAN's method of soft governance. As the main regional security dialogue in Asia, the ARF aims to mitigate territorial disputes and maintain the United States' engagement in the region as a security buffer, embodying the organization's tangled, yet strategic, approach to regional security issues (Haacke 2009; M. F. Karim and Chairil 2016).

In the economic domain, despite various initiatives aimed at strengthening regional ties—such as Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)—there has been a notable absence of successful institutionalization. These efforts have largely failed to yield robust institutional frameworks. Many scholars argue that this reflects a broader pattern of what might be termed “underinstitutionalization” in the region (Jetschke 2011; Demir 2018). Nonetheless, ASEAN has driven a burgeoning form of East Asian regionalism, particularly through the ASEAN+3 meetings, which have become a critical platform for regional economic dialogue (Yeo 2010).

The overarching lack of formal institutionalization has led scholars to characterize East Asian regionalism primarily as a network (Yeo 2010; Capie 2010). Networks, as Hafner-Burton et al. (2009) describe, are sets of relations forming structures that both constrain and enable the actors within them. This understanding underscores the importance of the positions and connections within the network as sources of power, rather than material capabilities of individual actors. Here, the notion of network power, where the actors can mobilize their networks to influence others, has proven useful in understanding the role of ASEAN as a regional organization. The organization has historically leveraged its complex networks to engage diverse actors across varying domains.

However, before such understanding of the network power of ASEAN, Asian regionalism was traditionally driven Japan's network power which enhanced regional economic integration by providing the region with its vast networks of interlinked corporations across the region. Unlike more formalized Western models, this form of regionalism lacks definitive political summits or economic structures, operating instead through a fluid and decentralized network of state and non-state interactions (Katzenstein and Shiraishi 1997). In the 1990s, either the Japanese or overseas Chinese variant of network power significantly shaped Asia's regionalism, eschewing formal institutions for market-driven interactions underpinned by *keiretsu* systems of cross-shareholding. These networks facilitated economic integration by engaging local firms to Japan-driven regional supply chains without the direct involvement of formal international institutions. This in return leverage local resources and consumer markets for regional economic development.

The ascendancy of China and the introduction of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) prompt a re-evaluation of these established networks. The central question now is to what extent the BRI has reconfigured existing networks and stimulated new ones, and how these changes have affected the flexibility or rigidity of Asian regionalization. This paper argues that with China's rise, the dynamics within these networks have slightly shifted. China's state-led capitalism is not only enhancing its commercial presence but also integrating their presence as an integral part of ASEAN economic network that centered on China. This integration is marked by

alliances between state-directed efforts through China state activism and Chinese private entrepreneurial activities (Santasombat 2017). The significant investment by Chinese companies in ASEAN's manufacturing sector highlights China's growing influence. The impact of these evolving networks is profound, positioning China at the center of a new regional configuration, where other Asian nations increasingly form part of a hinterland to China's expanding economic sphere.

This network-centric approach has intensified debates about the role and influence of Chinese capital in domestic political economy of host countries. Existing scholarship on the influence of Chinese capital in Southeast Asia frequently emphasizes the role of ethnic Chinese communities as intermediaries facilitating economic and political connections between China and host countries (Santasombat 2018; Liang et al. 2019). In Cambodia for instance, the Chinese-Cambodian community has historically been instrumental in developing economic ties between China and Cambodia by bridging Cambodian elites and Chinese interests. This phenomenon can also be seen in Thailand, where the Sino-Thai economic elites have used their ethnic and cultural ties to navigate and capitalize on the growing influence of China in the region (Siphath 2019). However, this body of literature tends to overlook how Chinese capital interacts with other non-Chinese local elites. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining how the presence of Chinese capital in Indonesia interact with local oligarchic interests especially non-Chinese local elites.

This is important because in the context of Indonesia, the emergence of new developmentalism under Joko Widodo is underpinned by the increased dominance of oligarch within Widodo's administration. Simultaneously, there is a proactive stance of the Indonesian government under President Joko Widodo in embracing China's "going out" strategy (Liu and Lim 2023). This approach is characterized by several initiatives, such as the establishment of a dedicated desk by the Investment Coordinating Board (BKPM) to attract Chinese investors, and aggressive investment promotion activities in China. Such actions demonstrate a national-level strategy to court Chinese investment, which has been particularly visible in high-stakes projects like the High-Speed Railway, where Indonesian state-owned enterprises formed a consortium with China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC). As a result, there is a connection between Widodo administration's growing appetite for Chinese capital and the increasing dominance of oligarchic power under Widodo. Such intertwining of Chinese investment with oligarchic interests is exemplified in the nickel smelting industry in Morowali (Camba et al. 2022). The frequent visits by members of the Jokowi administration to nickel smelting firms highlight a symbiotic relationship that not only underscores the national government's direct involvement in facilitating Chinese investments but also raises concerns about the extent of influence exerted by central government officials over local and provincial governance.

Given the above discussion, there is a need to revisit the conceptualization of network power, where Chinese state capital does not merely change the existing networks but actively participates in creating new kinds of networks that intertwine with local political and economic elites. This embeddedness of Chinese capital at both the national and local levels fosters a base of support that can withstand contestations over the benefits of Chinese investments. Thus, this paper proposes a model of network power that not only acknowledges the role of Chinese and local elites in

shaping economic landscapes but also considers how these networks reinforce the strategic interests of both Chinese investors and Indonesian political actors, creating a durable alignment that shapes policy and economic outcomes in Indonesia.

Conceptualizing patronage embeddedness of Chinese network power

To refine the understanding of network power in the context of China's engagement, this paper adopts the concept of embeddedness, a term frequently encountered across various disciplines but often interpreted differently depending on the context. Polanyi (2001), who coined the term, argues that economic behaviors cannot be viewed as isolated phenomena but must be analyzed within the relational frameworks that define and shape them. According to Polanyi, economic activities are deeply influenced by and interact with existing institutions and cultural norms. This interaction explains how economic actions are integrated within the broader societal fabric. While Polanyi emphasizes more on the structural relationship of economy and other societal subsystems, embeddedness can be seen through a more relational lens. Through that understanding, the notion of embeddedness stresses the role of personal relations and structures or networks of such relations in generating trust and discouraging malfeasance (Granovetter 1985, 490). Research on embeddedness has proliferated across multiple disciplines, such as market behavior analysis, where it is employed to understand how economic decisions are influenced by networks. Studies on firms and multinational corporations (MNCs) have widely discussed how MNCs can combine the advantages of global strategies with embeddedness in heterogeneous social, particularly national, contexts. This embeddedness contributes to the innovativeness of MNCs by facilitating access to external resources and competencies as well as coordination with internal and external actors (Heidenreich 2012). In the case of embeddedness in financial capital for instance, the social embeddedness of firms with their banks affects their access to financing and the conditions of that financing, such as interest rates. Firms that have strong social ties with their banks tend to receive more favorable loan terms and easier access to capital (Uzzi 1999).

Building upon this understanding, this paper introduces the notion of "patronage embeddedness." This concept specifically examines how foreign capital strategically embeds itself within local political landscapes to reshape local power dynamics. Foreign capital may form alliances with local oligarchs who have the ability to influence policy decisions. In doing so, it ensures not only the protection of Chinese investments but also their long-term sustainability. The alliances forged through are not one-sided but deeply symbiotic, providing mutual benefits to both the foreign investors and local oligarchs. However, this symbiosis often comes at the expense of broader national interests, as it can compromise local governance and economic autonomy often prioritizing foreign agendas over domestic welfare.

Through patronage embeddedness, we can understand how foreign capital, specifically Chinese investments, navigates the existing patron-client dynamics prevalent within Indonesian politics. These dynamics are characterized by reciprocal

relationships where the local political figures act as patrons by providing protection. In return, they gain the loyalty and support of clients—in this case, the Chinese foreign investors. By aligning their interests with those of influential locals, Chinese investors can ensure continued support from the state for their investment and minimize resistance from societal forces that often mobilize anti-Chinese rhetoric should they get no economic gain from Chinese capital. This deep integration of Chinese interests into the Indonesian socio-political fabric exemplifies a sophisticated form of network power that is not merely cooperative but also subtly coercive creating dependency that may later support policies favoring Chinese objectives.

Recent debates around China's global strategies, particularly concerning the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), often revolve around accusations of a “debt trap diplomacy”—a strategy purportedly used by China to ensnare nations into unsustainable levels of debt to leverage geopolitical gains (Carmody 2020). Critics like Lee and Hameiri (2020) argue against this view, suggesting that the BRI is motivated primarily by economic rather than geopolitical factors. We agree with this view that the economic factors are the main motivations behind Chinese investments. However, we further argue that these motivations are intricately woven into the interest of local elite networks in Indonesia. This process, termed here as “Patronage Embeddedness,” involves a symbiotic yet potentially exploitative relationship where local oligarchs entrap foreign capital to bolster their own power and economic standing, without direct coercion from Chinese actors.

As such, the creation of patronage embeddedness is built upon predatory relations at the domestic level in which the Chinese capital can form a deeper connection to embed themselves to patronage relations. In the case of Indonesia, such patronage system was increasingly fragmented when Suharto's authoritarian regime collapse in 1998 (Aspinal 2013). As a result, the political economy of Indonesia, post-democratization, has been significantly shaped by the rise of diverse oligarchs and predatory interests that have managed to capture varying degrees of state power at varying levels of government ranging from local to national.

The decentralization process, often lauded for promoting local autonomy, inadvertently reinforced such fragmentation of patronage networks by increasing the local stakes of political and economic control (Karim et al. 2023). These networks are not merely residues of a pre-democratic era but have been actively reproduced within the context of democratic Indonesia. The culture of patronage, deeply embedded in Indonesian society, draws from traditional Javanese conceptualizations of power, which emphasize patron-client linkages as fundamental social relationships (Simandjuntak, 2012). The transition to direct local elections further cemented this patronage democracy. This is because democratization process has introduced a high-cost political environment, wherein the financial burdens of campaigning and electioneering compel political parties and candidates to seek substantial economic backing (Muhtadi 2015). This political reality has led to an increasing integration of wealthy capitalists within political ranks, not merely as financiers but as active political participants. With the rise of political costs, candidates without substantial financial backing are less likely to be chosen by political parties resulting in the political institutions increasingly comprising individuals with significant business

interests (Muhtadi 2019). As a result, this further strengthens patron-client relations between politicians and business interest both at the national and local level.

Warburton (2024) highlights how democratization has facilitated a dramatic increase in the number of entrepreneurs entering executive government. This phenomenon is particularly evident under the Joko Widodo Administration (2014–2024), who himself was a businessman before entering politics. It is not surprising that under Widodo, there has been a noticeable rise in the presence of businessman within political institutions especially in his cabinet. Furthermore, over the 10 years of his administration, it is noteworthy to note that a considerable proportion of legislators are also businessmen. Around 55% of members in the House of Representatives (DPR) are involved in businesses, predominantly in sectors such as mining, technology, manufacturing, and retail (Aidulsyah et al. 2020). These political actors now enjoy greater social and political legitimacy than ever before. This signals a significant transformation in the intersection of business and politics within Indonesia's democratic context especially in relation to foreign capital. Through the notion of patronage embeddedness, our conceptualization not only shifts the narrative from a one-sided portrayal of Chinese agency but also highlights a dual agency scenario where Chinese investors and local politicians cum businessmen partake in a mutually beneficial relationship. Although this relationship offers advantages to both parties, it does not necessarily align with the broader interests of the Indonesian populace.

In Indonesia, patronage embeddedness is particularly evident in sectors such as nickel mining. As discussed below, the mining sector has become a realm where the network power of Chinese investment has transformed into patronage embeddedness, characterized by local oligarchs, and aims to actively engage with Chinese capital. This interaction highlights a nuanced form of interaction that extends beyond mere strategic manipulation by foreign entities. These relationships often emerge to forms of “entrapment” where Chinese capital, while initially willingly invested, becomes deeply enmeshed in local operational and political frameworks that are primarily orchestrated by local oligarchs. This entrapment implies that Chinese investors, though entering agreements by choice, find themselves integrated into a pre-existing system that disproportionately benefits the oligarchs, often at the expense of broader societal or economic equities.

Chinese investment in Indonesia's mining sector

In order to transform its economy toward a more globally connected one, Southeast Asia has been increasingly dependent on foreign capital to maintain its economic growth. Recently, the role of Chinese investments has become particularly prominent in achieving the goal. China, ranking as the third largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) into ASEAN countries after the United States of America (USA) and the European Union (EU), directed a substantial US\$18.65 billion into ASEAN in 2022 alone. This investment represents 11.4 percent of China's total overseas direct investment (ODI) for the year and accounts for 15 percent of all ODI flows into Asia. By 2022, China's ODI stock stood at US\$154.66 billion, signifying 5.6

percent of the global total and 8.4 percent of investment stock in Asia, with over 6500 Chinese companies established in the region employing more than 660,000 foreign workers (Huld 2023). In Indonesia, Chinese investment is widely speculated to dominate the foreign investment landscape, ostensibly ranked third after Singapore and Hong Kong. However, it is widely believed that both Singapore and Hong Kong primarily serve as conduits for Chinese capital destined for Indonesian markets, suggesting that China might effectively occupy the top position in terms of real investment impact.

This section explores the patronage embeddedness of Chinese BRI projects in Indonesia with focus on the Morowali Industrial Park and Weda Bay Industrial Park. These projects are designed not only to spur economic growth in Indonesia's peripheral regions but also to strategically integrate these areas into China's burgeoning industrial demands driven by the global surge in nickel required for electric vehicle (EV) production. The involvement of major Chinese corporations like Tsingshan Holding Group in Indonesia's nickel industry is a prime example of this strategy (Tritto and Camba 2022). These investments arguably have been instrumental in transitioning Indonesia's nickel sector from a primarily extraction-based to one focused on sophisticated, value-added production (Lu 2024). By incorporating advanced Chinese technology, these initiatives have shifted the industry toward higher stages of the nickel value chain, significantly enhancing Indonesia's export capabilities. Remarkably, from 2014 to 2023, Indonesia's annual nickel ore production skyrocketed by 395%, rising from 39 million tons to 193 million tons. This increase has been accompanied by a substantial growth in smelter infrastructure, with the number of units expanding from 31 to 116 (Muliawati 2023).

The entry of Tsingshan was facilitated by a cooperation agreement with the Indonesian Bintangdelapan Group, an Indonesian company, to develop the Morowali Industrial Park in Central Sulawesi. This collaboration was initiated during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Indonesia in 2013. As a result, the project is seen as one of the early BRI project in Indonesia. Over the decade since its inception, the Morowali Industrial Park has experienced exponential growth, with investments surging to US\$20.9 billion and covering around 4000 hectares (Yean and Negara 2020). This rapid development has been actively supported by the Indonesian government, particularly through policies aimed at fostering industrial growth in the extractive sectors. Today, the Morowali Industrial Park, managed by PT Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park (IMIP), has become a critical hub for nickel processing. It houses three specialized clusters producing essential components for stainless steel, carbon steel, and electric vehicle batteries. Tsingshan's substantial stake of 66.25% in IMIP exemplifies the profound level of Chinese investment in Indonesia's nickel industry (Rahajeng 2017).

In addition to Morowali, Chinese capital has also made significant inroads into Halmahera Island in North Maluku Province through the establishment of PT Indonesia Weda Bay Industrial Park (IWIP), a nickel industrial area in Weda, Central Halmahera. Established on August 30, 2018, IWIP, similar to IMIP, is designated as a National Priority Project (IWIP 2024). This industrial park processes raw materials for ferro-nickel and derivatives for electric vehicle batteries, stainless steel, support facilities, and smelters. The Teluk Weda Industrial

Area is identified as an industrial growth center requiring 866.44 hectares of land managed by IWIP. The documents also mention that the detailed spatial plan for the Teluk Weda industrial area (RDTR KI) is expected to generate employment for 100,000 workers (M. Karim 2023).

The majority of shares in IWIP are held by Tsingshan (40%) through its subsidiary, Perlux Technology Co. Ltd., while Zhenshi and Huayou each control 30% of the shares (Barahamin 2021). Tsingshan's collaborations with other Chinese firms to develop the Weda Bay Industrial Park in Central Halmahera further exemplify the strategic nature of Chinese investments aimed at enhancing Indonesia's capacities in mining and processing, thereby embedding the country more deeply within China's global industrial ambitions (Multatuli and Singgih 2024). The investment provided by companies like Tsingshan into Indonesia nickel processing industry is not merely a process of regular foreign direct investment. Such investment also reflects how Chinese capital becomes embedded to Indonesia's patronage relations. Indeed that the influx of Chinese investments into Indonesia's mining sectors, particularly nickel, has undoubtedly catalyzed significant industrial development particularly with reference to projects like the Morowali and Weda Bay Industrial Park. The narrative thus far has elucidated the significant role of Chinese investments in enhancing Indonesia's capabilities in mining and processing nickel that is crucial for industries such as stainless steel production and electric vehicle manufacturing (Rachman 2023). However, this represents only one facet of the impact of these investments. Despite these investments have fortified Indonesia's export capabilities, they also call for a nuanced evaluation of their broader implications; the benefits are disproportionately accrued by Chinese investors and a select cohort of large Indonesian businesses that have entered into collaborations with these foreign entities. This skewed distribution of gains raises concerns about the equitable development and sustainable economic growth in Indonesia.

The policy of downstreaming, which the government has vigorously promoted to boost value-added production in the mining sector, particularly nickel, has in practice endowed privileges for Chinese investments. To promote such policy, numerous key officials at both the national and regional levels have actively supported and to some extent, participated in business activities associated with nickel mining. Transparency International Indonesia (2024) has identified five interconnected rings of actors involved in a complex web of power relationships within the political elite and nickel oligarchy in Indonesia's nickel rich region namely (1) actors within the Presidential circle, (2) actors at the ministerial level, (3) actors ranging from former generals to former vice presidents, (4) actors within conglomerates and political circles, and (5) regional officials. This network of actors that support this business underscores the potentially exploitative nature of these investments, where the alignment of business interests with political power results in a concentration of wealth and influence that does not necessarily translate into broader societal benefits. This phenomenon is what we term patronage embeddedness of Chinese investment. The next section will elaborate further the patronage embeddedness of Chinese investment in practice.

Patronage embeddedness of Chinese investment

The concept of patronage embeddedness effectively captures the deep integration of Chinese investments in Indonesia. This phenomenon reflects how Chinese capital has not merely engaged with existing political structures but has reshaped them by intensifying regulatory changes at the national and local level, deepening the involvement of local oligarchs and exacerbating corruption in areas with heavy Chinese investment. At the national level, the embedding of Chinese capital is facilitated through legislative changes designed to streamline and simplify the investment process in strategic sectors such as minerals and mining. These changes are not merely procedural but strategic, aiming to reduce bureaucratic barriers that previously hindered the flow of foreign capital, particularly from China, into Indonesia. For instance, the revision of the Mining Law (UU Minerba) illustrates a clear shift toward deregulation. The new law eliminates the requirement for government consultation with the DPR (People's Representative Council) on production control and exports, stipulating instead that such matters can be regulated directly through government regulations (Peraturan Pemerintah) (WALHI 2021).

Furthermore, the law simplifies the mining business licensing process by abolishing the dualism of Mining Business Licenses (*Izin Usaha Pertambangan, IUP*) for exploration and operation zones. Under the revised law, a single IUP now covers both exploration and production activities, which previously required separate permits. This change significantly streamlines the process. Additionally, the revised Mining Law expands operational capacities for businesses, increasing the potential for economic exploitation without introducing corresponding regulations to ensure the sustainability of resources or prioritize local community welfare. For example, the boundaries for People's Mining Areas (*Wilayah Pertambangan Rakyat, WPR*) have been significantly broadened, both in terms of the depth and area of reserves that can be mined. Additionally, the criteria for designating an area as WPR have been relaxed, potentially opening up more land to large-scale mining operations under the guise of small-scale or local mining initiatives (Umam et al. 2021).

These legislative changes at the national level demonstrate how the Indonesian government, in pursuit of economic growth through foreign investment, particularly from China, has embedded these economic interests into its legislative framework. This strategic embedding aligns with the interests of local oligarchs who benefit from eased regulations and increased capital flows. Yet, it raises concerns about the long-term implications for national resource management, environmental sustainability, and equitable distribution of economic benefits. This model of patronage embeddedness thus highlights a complex interplay between foreign capital and national policy, where mutual benefits for Chinese investors and Indonesian elites are prioritized over broader societal and environmental considerations.

Patronage embeddedness is notably evident in Morowali and Weda Bay, two peripheral regions in Indonesia enriched with nickel resources and significant

recipients of Chinese investment. The establishment of the Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park (IMIP) with substantial Chinese capital has facilitated the granting of numerous concessions to entities linked to politicians and government officials. For example, the integrated nickel mining and processing projects in Morowali and Pomalaa were included in the National Strategic Projects (PSN) list in July 2022. Covering an area of 4000 hectares as of 2022, this region is being developed by Tsingshan in partnership with the Bintangdelapan Group, a company affiliated with retired Lieutenant General Sintong Panjaitan. Panjaitan serves as the chief commissioner for several key companies within the Bintangdelapan Group. He is also a commissioner in other companies owned by Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, who was then the Minister of Maritime Affairs and Investment. By the end of 2023, subsidiaries of the Bintangdelapan Group controlled at least six nickel mining concessions covering a total area of 52,406 hectares in Morowali, Central Sulawesi (Multatuli and Singgih 2024).

At the local level, the integration of Chinese capital has significantly transformed the landscape of local political dynamics in Central Sulawesi. Here, the interplay between Chinese investments and local oligarchic interests is particularly stark, as evidenced by the growing involvement of politician-businessmen, retired military officials, and their families in the nickel mining industry. At least 16 business-minded politicians closely linked with nickel mining activities. These individuals hold positions not only in political parties, mass organizations, religious groups, and government bodies but also possess shares and serve the boards of mining companies (Zuada et al. 2023).

The application of patronage embeddedness in the Indonesian nickel mining sector offers a vivid illustration of how local actors strategically align themselves with Chinese capital to derive economic benefits, thereby reinforcing a complex web of dependencies. The process of granting business licenses, initially handled predominantly at the local level—where mayors and governors issued the majority of nickel mining permits—has been instrumental in shaping these dynamics (Utami 2023). Prior to central government efforts to streamline licensing, approximately 76% of these permits were distributed by local government authorities, facilitating direct interactions between Chinese investors and local power brokers (Zuada et al. 2023). This decentralized control over licensing has enabled local oligarchs to embed themselves within the supply chains of Chinese-owned smelters, turning these connections into lucrative opportunities. By positioning themselves as essential suppliers for Chinese companies operating in their region, these local oligarchs tapped into significant economic benefits, effectively embedding their interests with those of the Chinese investors. This relationship is mutually beneficial: it secures a reliable local supply chain for Chinese operations while ensuring substantial profits for local business elites.

However, this embeddedness has also exposed the sector to significant risks of corruption, particularly in areas such as licensing, operations, and sales. The perpetuation of illegal mining activities serves as a stark example of how deeply embedded interests can distort industry practices to favor a few at the expense of broader regulatory integrity. Illegal mining in Indonesia manifests in two principal forms: operations conducted without proper legal documentation and legally documented

miners who exceed their designated boundaries, including mining in corridor areas or on lands owned by other companies or currently under legal dispute. This process often involves collusion with local authorities and village elites, who facilitate illegal activities in exchange for a share in the profits. Companies like IMIP, while primarily concerned with the quality of nickel ore, inadvertently support these practices by failing to scrutinize the legality of the mining operations from which they source their raw materials.

The issue of embeddedness is also evident in North Maluku, an area that has become the second site of huge Chinese investment in nickel mining. The inflow of capital has attracted a multitude of local oligarchs, drawn to the economic opportunities that these investments bring. This has also resulted in a reshaping of local power dynamics, where these oligarchs leverage their enhanced economic stature to influence political decisions that favor Chinese interests. This manipulation of local politics is not just limited to passive participation but extends to active engineering of local regulations to secure and maintain their power and profits.

The process of patronage embeddedness is exemplified by the way in which Chinese capital has influenced local bureaucrats to manipulate regulatory frameworks to benefit their investment projects. In one notable instance, collusion between a prominent Chinese-owned company, local government officials, and a national regulatory body led to the reclassification of forested areas to permit commercial exploitation (Yaputra 2023). This strategic alteration of local zoning laws was facilitated by a recommendation issued by the local government, specifically through a high-ranking official within the Regional Planning and Development Agency, under circumstances that raised significant ethical concerns. This adjustment of the Spatial Land Use Plan (RTRW) exemplifies how local administrative powers, swayed by foreign investments, modify regulatory landscapes to align with business interests at the expense of environmental sustainability and the welfare of local communities. Such maneuvers underscore the embedded influence of external capital in shaping policy and regulatory environments to favor investment over public or ecological interests (Transparency International Indonesia 2024).

Given the above discussion, arguably, patronage embeddedness allows us to elaborate how Chinese new network power has been more than just creating a network among stakeholders that enhance economic integration between Indonesia and China. Through this notion, it is clear that the Chinese capital has been embedded in Indonesia's patronage system and has been mobilized by the Indonesian oligarch to provide them with benefit. The concept of Patronage Embeddedness in the context of Chinese investments in Indonesia brings to light several insights. First, Chinese capital shows a remarkable capacity to adapt to existing local power networks. This adaptation involves playing into the hands of local oligarchs who have established control over these networks. This ensures that Chinese investment operations align with the interests of these powerful groups. Furthermore, while the partnerships between Chinese investors and Indonesian oligarchs are mutually beneficial, they tend to perpetuate existing inequalities and reinforce the power of local elites. The benefits derived from these partnerships have in return disproportionately skewed toward the benefit of the oligarchs and their networks while offering limited advantages to the broader Indonesian populace. Lastly, over time, the interdependencies

created by these relationships have transformed into complex networks that are embedded in Indonesia's political economy where many stakeholders have been deeply integrated due to the benefit they get. This entanglement makes it challenging for either party—Chinese investors or local oligarchs—to withdraw or disengage without facing significant economic or political repercussions. This entanglement, while beneficial in maintaining operational continuity and local support, raises significant concerns about the sustainability of foreign investment in mining sectors.

Conclusion

A pressing question among International Relations scholars concerns why, despite apparent threats, Indonesia continues to engage with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While various responses to this question have been proposed, focusing primarily on how Asian policymakers derive benefits from China through strategic hedging—maintaining economic relations while containing China's influence in the security realm by engaging with the US—these explanations often treat the state as a singular, coherent actor.

To provide a more nuanced understanding, the paper examines the political economy aspect of expansion of Chinese investment to Asian countries with special focus on Indonesia. Existing literature on Indonesia's approach on China highlights how politicians leveraged Chinese investment for their developmental agendas (Camba 2022). This paper furthers this line of logic by conceptualizing the notion of patronage embeddedness. We show that Chinese investment has created new types of network power in which China can strategically aligns its investment interest with pre-existing patron-client structures in host countries. Unlike traditional forms of network power that emphasize on the use of investment, developmental aid, loan penetration, and supplier networks penetration, and the creation of a system of production alliances to forge a more interconnectedness, patronage embeddedness is a form of network where foreign capital embeds itself within local political and economic networks to secure its interests through existing patronage relationships. However, this patronage embeddedness also disproportionately benefits the local oligarch more in this relationship enabling them to make the Chinese investment as part of their priority. In fact, as we have shown in the analysis, Chinese investments have created a space for oligarch at the national and local level to pursue economic gain by taking advantage of Chinese capital.

Through the notion of patronage embeddedness, our conceptualization not only shifts the narrative from a one-sided portrayal of Chinese agency but also highlights a dual agency scenario where Chinese investors and local oligarchs partake in a mutually beneficial relationship. The contribution of this paper lies in its refined conceptualization of network power as not only a means of economic integration but also a tool for embedding foreign capital within the socio-political fabric of host nations. As a result, the implications of Chinese investment through BRI projects should not be viewed solely as instruments for deepening economic integration but also as political tools that align the interests.

China's new network power, facilitated through patronage embeddedness, poses significant risks, particularly by potentially clouding Indonesia's geopolitical interests. It is crucial for the Indonesian public to pressure the government to strengthen regulatory frameworks to ensure transparency in investment processes, especially those related to China. This includes revising laws and procedures that currently favor oligarchic interests. One concrete step is implementing strict regulations to monitor the issuance of licenses and concessions to prevent corruption. Additionally, the Indonesian government should adopt policies aimed at reducing the dominance of politician-businessmen in sectors like mining. This can be achieved by setting clear conflict-of-interest regulations and introducing transparency requirements for public officials involved in business activities.

More importantly, the Indonesian government should not prioritize this type of economic development solely dependent on Chinese investment. Instead, it should diversify its investment sources to include other countries. To achieve this, Indonesia must reform its investment landscape by reducing bureaucratic red tape, thereby creating an environment more conducive to attracting foreign investments from a wider range of countries, not just China.

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Data Availability The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Moch Faisal Karim, upon reasonable request. All data used in this research comply with institutional and ethical guidelines for research dissemination.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no competing interests.

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