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Public Perceptions of China in Indonesia: The Indonesia National Survey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Indonesian views of China have remained largely consistent since the end of the New Order Period twenty years ago.
- While the majority of respondents admire China, there was skepticism about the impact of the rise of China on Indonesia.
- Indonesians generally think that having close economic ties with China will benefit their country, although they were divided on how significant the benefits are.
- Unlike the negative views circulating on Indonesian social media, there are degrees of acceptance of Chinese migrant workers and of Chinese investment in Indonesia.
- Most respondents share the government's position that Indonesia is a non-claimant country in the South China Sea dispute. Respondents who were aware of recent incidents involving Chinese and Indonesian vessels off the coast of the Natuna Islands regard it as a national security issue.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite increasingly close relations between Indonesia and China, concerns about Chinese investments and workers, as well as developments in the South China Sea, continue to dominate public discourse about China in Indonesia. The coming of migrant workers from China has been under public scrutiny since the second half of 2015.¹ At the same time, fear that a significant number of Chinese people would inundate Indonesia was widespread in social media and the non-mainstream Indonesian media. Incidents occurring in waters near the Natuna Islands, which involved China's and Indonesia's security agencies have also been widely discussed by the Indonesian public. Meanwhile, a number of political elite groups who have taken an oppositional stance against President Joko (Jokowi) Widodo have showed their disappointment regarding several issues, including Indonesia's growing reliance on Chinese loans.² This latter phenomenon has raised the question about how contemporary Indonesians view Sino-Indonesian relations and the rise of China.

In this article, I analyse the findings of the Indonesia National Survey Project (INSP), that was commissioned by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute and carried out by Lembaga Survey Indonesia in May 2017.³ The INSP data were collected through face-to-face interviews with 1,620 adult Indonesian citizens (17 years old and above and/or married). The survey employed a multi-stage random sampling method, and the questions asked do not only probe perceptions of China, but also other social, political, economic, and international relations issues. This analysis will however focus on questions pertaining to public perception of China, and of China's relations with Indonesia.

VIEWS OF CHINA IN THE *REFORMASI* ERA

In the aftermath of the 1965 attempted coup, an event that was allegedly masterminded by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), the newly founded Indonesian government – proponent of the New Order – developed a perception that regarded China as a communist country that posed a threat to Indonesian national security. The New Order regime alleged that China had provided some help to the PKI in the coup attempt and that China had maintained ties with Southeast Asian communist parties and might potentially help the Indonesian communists make a comeback. The “China threat” perception was not held only by the political elite but was actively transmitted to the Indonesian public as well. The negative perception of China – and of the ethnic Chinese – was widespread in Indonesia throughout the New Order period.

A more positive perception of China emerged after Indonesia entered its “*reformasi*” era in 1998. This was partly a result of what Rizal Sukma calls “the policy of seeking active re-

¹ For a detailed description on the issue concerning Mainland Chinese workers in Indonesia, see Leo Suryadinata, “The Growing ‘Strategic Partnership’ between Indonesia and China Faces Difficult Challenges.” *Trends in Southeast Asia*, No. 15. 2017. Pp. 17-21.

² Johannes Herlijanto, “How the Indonesian Elite Regards Relations with China,” *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 8, Issue 2017.

³ For the complete report of the INSP, see Diego Fossati, Hui Yew-Foong, and Siwage Dharma Negara, “The Indonesian National Survey Project: Economy, Society, and Politics.” *Trends In Southeast Asia*, No. 10. 2017.

engagement with China,” launched by President Abdurrahman Wahid, President Megawati Sukarnoputri, and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.⁴ But it was also caused by the high frequency of visits by government officials, businessmen, and even private officials.⁵ These visits provided them with good knowledge about China’s economic success and anti-corruption policy. China has been increasingly seen as a reference for success by quite a few Indonesian academics, public intellectuals, and opinion leaders.⁶ Surveys on Indonesian perceptions of China have confirmed these to be generally positive. The Pew Research Institute found that between 2005 and 2014, the proportion of Indonesians holding a favorable opinion of China ranged from 55 per cent to 73 per cent.⁷ During the same time, favorable views of the United States (US) among Indonesian respondents ranged from 29 per cent in 2007 to a peak of 63 percent in 2009.⁸

Similarly, the Jakarta-based Centre for China Studies (CCS) also conducted a survey among urban dwellers to find out their opinion about countries with significant ties to Indonesia.⁹ Carried out in September 2014, the survey questioned 1,096 Indonesian citizens living in 15 cities. About 71 per cent of respondents regarded China as a favorable country, somewhat below the figure for those who liked Japan (86 per cent), the United States (74 per cent), and India (72 per cent).¹⁰ A large number of Indonesian respondents liked China for having good traditional medicine, and they would consider going there for treatment.¹¹ Also, 65 per cent also regarded China as a partner for Indonesia, whereas 63 per cent was optimistic that Sino-Indonesian economic relations would grow much faster than Indonesia’s economic relations with other countries.¹² However, only 18 per cent thought that China was Indonesia’s best partner especially, but not only, for business collaboration in the last ten years. This number is lower than those who regarded Japan (27 per cent) and the US (20 per cent) as the best partner.¹³ Perhaps, it is also worth noting that only 12 per cent of the respondents were aware of the territorial dispute in the South China Sea.¹⁴

VIEWS ON CHINA DURING JOKOWI’S PRESIDENCY

Public criticisms of China reappeared after Jokowi came to power in 2014. This was closely related to issues such as the Indonesian decision to give the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed

⁴ Rizal Sukma, “Indonesia’s Response to the Rise of China: Growing Comfort Amid Uncertainties.” In *The Rise of China: Responses from Southeast Asia and Japan*, NIDS Joint Research Series No. 4 (Tokyo: National Institute for Defence Studies, 2009), pp. 145-149.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. See also Johannes Herlijanto, “‘Search For Knowledge As Far As China!’ Indonesian Response to the Rise of China” In *Chinese Encounters In Southeast Asia: How People, Money, and Ideas from China Are Changing a Region*, edited by Pal Nyiri and Danielle Tan (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), pp. 195-213.

⁷ <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/24/country/101/> (accessed on 14 September 2017)

⁸ <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/country/101/> (accessed on 19 September 2017)

⁹ Natalia Soebagio and Rene L. Pattiradjawane, *Persepsi Masyarakat Indonesia Terhadap RRC* [Indonesian society’s perception of the PRC]. Jakarta: Centre for Chinese Studies, 2014.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 10-11

¹¹ Ibid., p. 12

¹² Ibid., p. 8

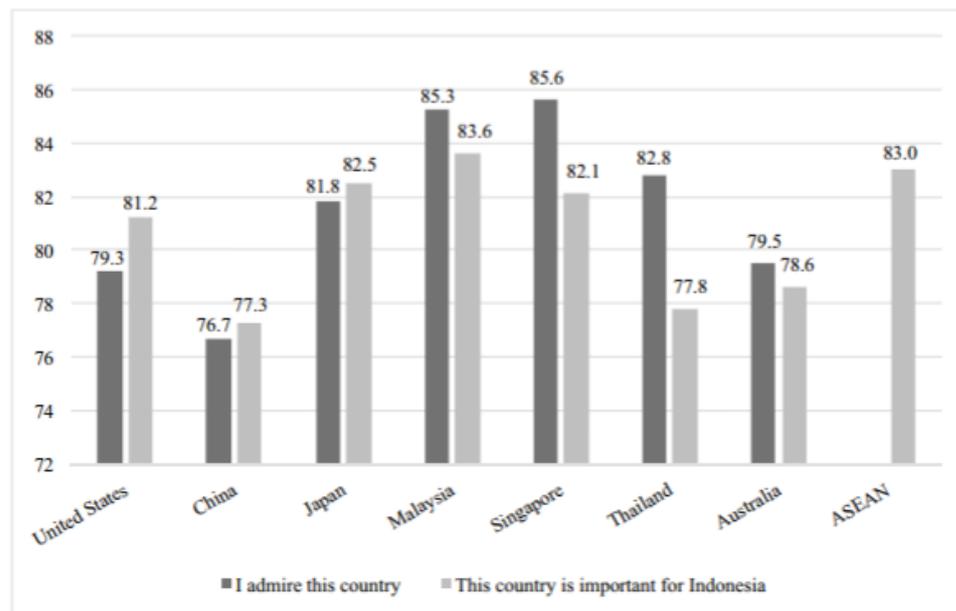
¹³ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

Railway construction project to China in October 2015, and the alleged “flood” of Chinese labourers into Indonesia. The latter has in particular become an issue widely circulated in the Indonesian social media, especially on sites belonging to anti-Chinese and anti-China groups.¹⁵ It is also used to beef up a black campaign against Jokowi, who is perceived to be too close to China.¹⁶ Some political elites have also expressed their concerns about the above issues.¹⁷ In addition, increasing Chinese investment in Indonesia, and tensions emerging over the South China Sea have also been considered worrisome.

However, the INSP data reveal that 76.7 per cent of Indonesian respondents still admires China, and 77.3 per cent view China as an important country for Indonesia (see figure 1). Despite the favourable response, respondents who view China positively rank the lowest where views of eight countries surveyed are concerned. The most admired country is Singapore (85.6 per cent), whereas the country considered most important is Malaysia (83.6 per cent). Yet the fact that more than three quarters of Indonesians still admire and regard China as an important country is interesting, because it shows that such positive attitudes persist despite the wide circulation of negative sentiments against China.

Figure 1: Perception of China among some other countries



Source: Diego Fossati, Hui Yew-Foong, and Siwage Dharma Negara, “The Indonesian National Survey Project: Economy, Society, and Politics,” p. 40

When the respondents are asked if they think the rise of China will have a positive or negative impact on neighboring countries, only 41 per cent think that the phenomenon will have a positive impact on Indonesia. However, it surpasses only slightly the number of those who thinks that the phenomenon will have a negative impact (39 per cent). The rest of the respondents think that the impact will be neutral. Furthermore, the majority of the

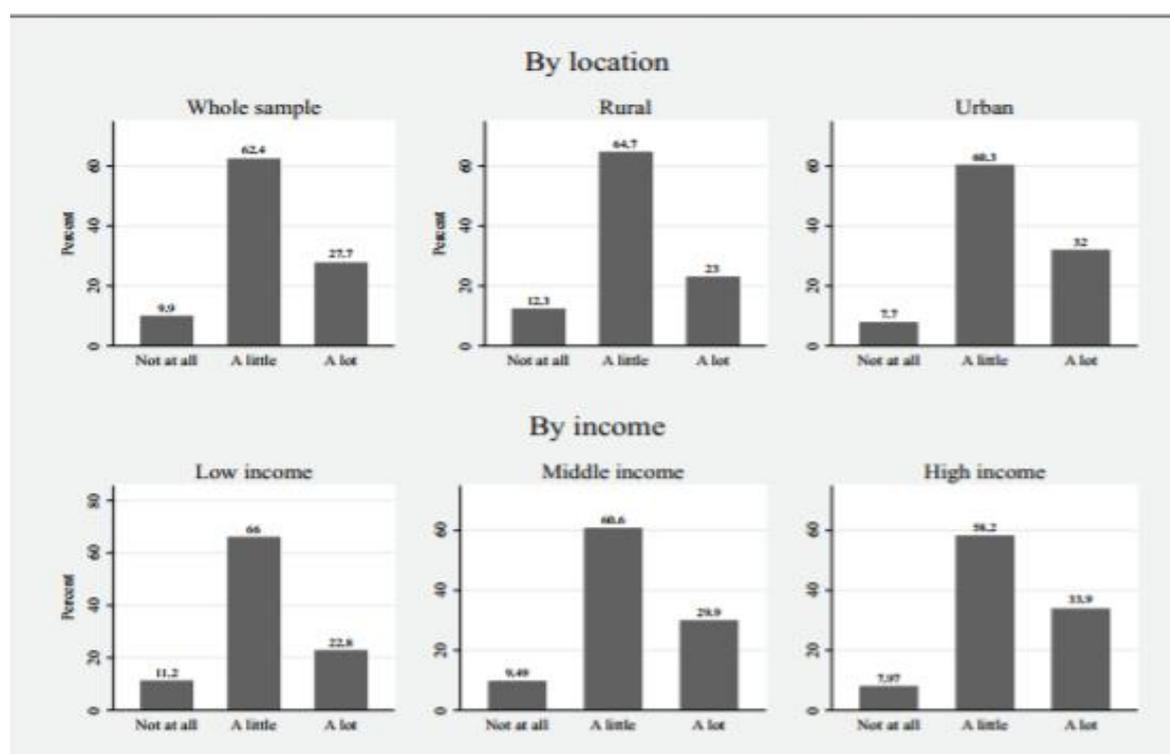
¹⁵ Suryadinata, “The Growing ‘Strategic Partnership’,” p. 18.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Johannes Herlijanto, “How the Indonesian Elite Regards Relations with China.”

respondents (90.1 per cent) thinks that Indonesia will benefit from having a close relationship with China, compared to 9.9 per cent who think that economic relations with China will not bring any benefit at all to Indonesia. Nevertheless, we should not ignore the fact that only 27.7 per cent of the INSP respondents have a positive view of close economic ties between Indonesia and China. A much larger percentage (62.4 per cent) thinks that Indonesia will only gain a little benefit from a close relationship with China (see figure 2). The survey also reveals that respondents from urban locations and who have higher income are more likely to think that closer economic ties with China will bring a lot of benefits to Indonesia.

Figure 2: Perception of how much close economic ties with China will benefit Indonesia.



Source: Diego Fossati, Hui Yew-Foong, and Siwage Dharma Negara, “The Indonesian National Survey Project: Economy, Society, and Politics,” p. 40

Chinese labourers are one of the issues that the INSP focuses on. Concerns about the arrival of Chinese workers have been widespread in Indonesian public discourse since the second half of 2015. In the last week of August 2015, *Tempo*, a prestigious Indonesian weekly magazine, reported on the supposed influx of many Chinese workers into Indonesia.¹⁸ Hoax news about millions of Chinese migrant workers inundating Indonesia were widespread in 2016, prompting the Minister of Manpower to issue a statement clarifying that the number of Chinese migrant workers in the country did not exceed 21 thousand people.¹⁹ Regardless,

¹⁸ *Tempo*, Monday 31 August 2015.

¹⁹ “Menteri Hanif: Tenaga Kerja Asal China Capai Jutaan, Itu Fitnah” (Minister Hanif: The number of Chinese Workers Reach Millions, That’s a Slander)

the government's effort to downplay the issue, and the arrival of some Chinese migrant workers sparked concerns and suspicions among Indonesians. Suspicion against new Chinese migrants flared up again following the arrest of five Chinese workers dressed like military personnel near the Halim Perdanakusuma Air Force base in Jakarta in April 2016.²⁰ Interestingly, despite it having been a hot issue in Indonesian social media of late, only 26.6 per cent of respondents think that Chinese migrants should not be allowed to work in Indonesia at all. The majority (50.2 per cent) thinks that they should be allowed to work but the government should limit their numbers, whereas 19.9 per cent thinks they should be allowed to work in Indonesia, only if they have high qualifications (See figure 3). This finding demonstrates that the Indonesian people have limited tolerance toward Chinese migrant workers. They generally welcome Chinese high skilled workers, such as technicians and managers, but most will not tolerate the coming of low skilled workers, who are considered a threat to Indonesian workers.

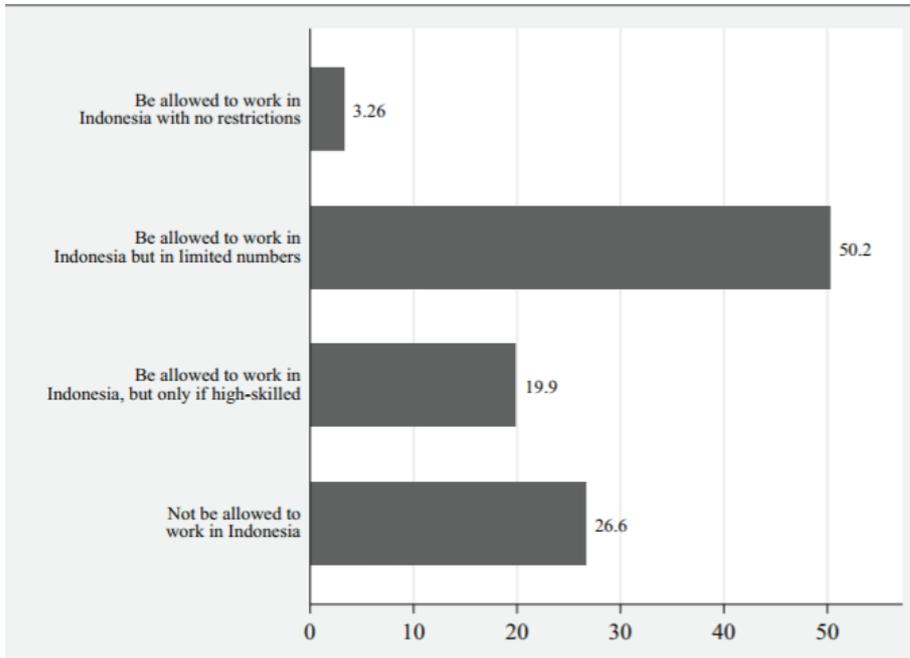
As indicated in Figure 4, 25.2 per cent is completely against Chinese investments in Indonesia. In contrast, 19.9 per cent opines that investment from China should be allowed. Meanwhile, 54.9 per cent thinks that such investment should be allowed, but only in some cases.

<http://regional.kompas.com/read/2016/12/23/12590211/menteri.hanif.tenaga.kerja.asal.china.capai.jutaan.itu.fitnah> (accessed on 20 September 2017)

²⁰ "Ngebor di Wilayah Lanud Halim, 5 Pekerja Cina Ditahan" (Drilling in Halim Air Force Base Area, 5 Chinese Workers Have Been Detained)

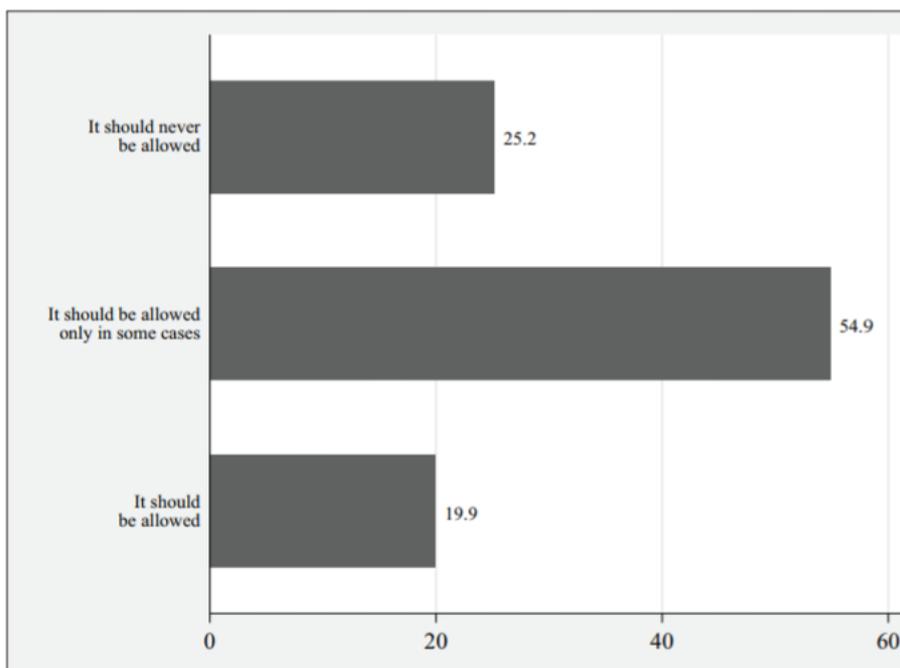
<http://nasional.republika.co.id/berita/nasional/jabodetabek-nasional/16/04/27/o6a1tc384-ngebor-di-wilayah-lanud-halim-5-pekerja-cina-ditahan> (accessed on 23 August 2016)

Figure 3: Attitudes on Chinese Workers, They should...



Source: Diego Fossati et. al. "The Indonesian National Survey Project," p. 44

Figure 4: Attitudes over Chinese Investment in Strategic Sectors



Source: Diego Fossati et. al, "The Indonesian National Survey Project: Economy, Society, and Politics," p. 45

The on-going maritime territorial dispute between China and some Southeast Asian countries in the South China Sea is another issue that the INSP seeks to understand. Many in Indonesia believe that the South China Sea dispute can grow into a big diplomatic problem due to China's increasing assertiveness, and this potentially threatens Indonesian interests. In addition, the incidents that had occurred several times in the waters near Natuna Islands involving the Indonesian and Chinese coastguards, have also come under public scrutiny recently. The Indonesian government has even renamed the Natuna Exclusive Economic Zone – which is a part of the South China Sea – as Laut Natuna Utara (North Natuna Sea). This action may be seen as an attempt to pacify domestic opposition against President Jokowi, who is often regarded as “pro-Beijing.”²¹ In this socio-political context, it is important to examine how Indonesians in general view the South China Sea territorial dispute and the incidents in the waters near Natuna Islands.

Again, the INSP survey has interesting findings (See figure 5 and 6). The first significant information concerns the Indonesian people's awareness of the above two issues. In the case of South China Sea issue, 53 per cent of respondents did not select an answer. As Fossati, Hui, and Negara explained, this non-response suggests a general lack of awareness of this issue.²² As many as 59 per cent did not give a response when asked for their opinion on recent military incidents near Natuna Islands. This may mean that most respondents are not aware of the issue. However, if we compare the above data with the finding of the 2014 CCS survey, we may conclude that the number of Indonesians who are aware of the above issues has significantly increased. As mentioned earlier, only 12 per cent of the CCS survey respondents knew about the South China Sea issue. The increased awareness of the issue may be caused by the popularity of the issue in social media, such as FaceBook and WhatsApp, which recently have been much more widely used in Indonesia. But the awareness is also a result of several events taking place in the last few years, including military training conducted at the Natuna Islands and Jokowi's visits to these islands.

With regards to the South China Sea, the respondents were invited to give their opinion on how they thought Indonesia should handle the matter. Among those who gave an answer to this question, 37.7 per cent think that Indonesia should not be involved because it is not a claimant state, while 50.7 per cent thinks that Indonesia should mediate between China and Southeast Asian countries. Both answers suggest that the majority share the government's position that Indonesia is not a claimant country. Both answers also suggest that the majority of the respondents think that Indonesia should retain its neutral position in the dispute. Only 10.2 per cent think that Indonesia should be on the side of the Southeast Asian claimant countries and should be supporting or leading them in negotiations with China.

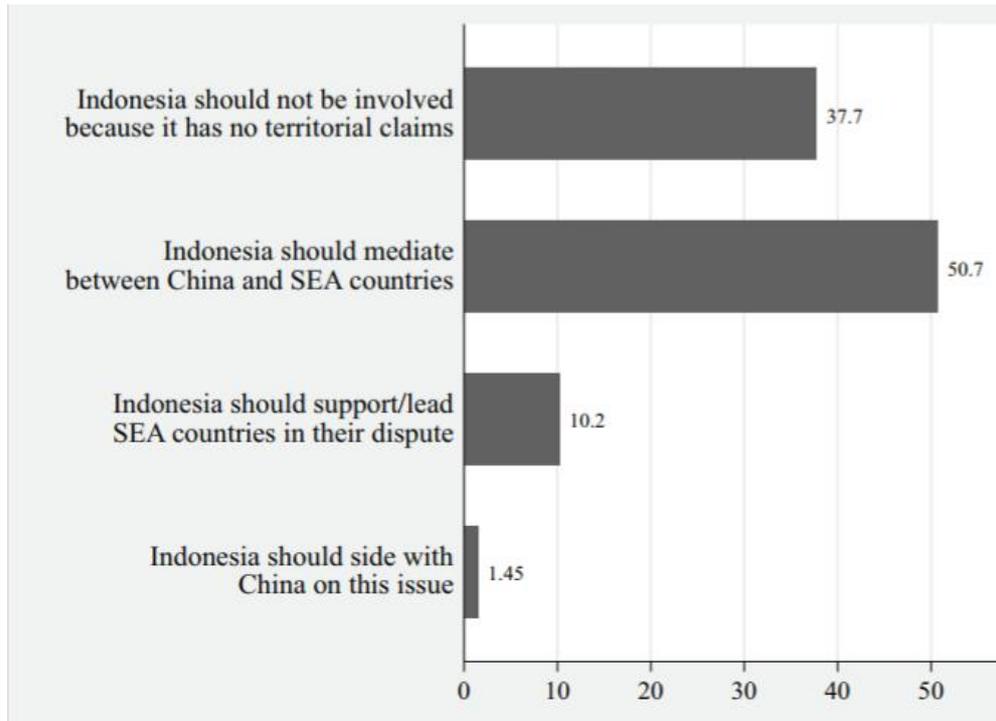
Nevertheless, respondents react differently to the question about recent incidents in the now-renamed North Natuna Sea. 50.6 per cent of the respondents who provide an answer regard the incidents as alarming since China has been encroaching on Indonesian territory, whereas 41.6 per cent think that the incidents are serious but were caused by illegal fishing. Only

²¹ Leo Suryadinata, “What Does Indonesia's Renaming of Part of the South China Sea Signify?” ISEAS Perspective, No, 64. 2017., p. 5. Also, Leo Suryadinata and Mustafa Izzudin, “The Natunas: Territorial Integrity in the Forefront of Indonesia – China relations.” Trends In Southeast Asia, No. 5. 2017., p. 23.

²² Fossati, Hui, and Negara, Op. Cit., p. 44.

7.76 per cent think that the incidents a small matter. In short, most of the respondents who are aware of the incidents regard it as a serious issue, and most considered it a national security issue. This means that more than half of the respondents who gave an answer do not share the Indonesian government’s formal position of regarding the Natuna issue only as an illegal fishing matter.²³

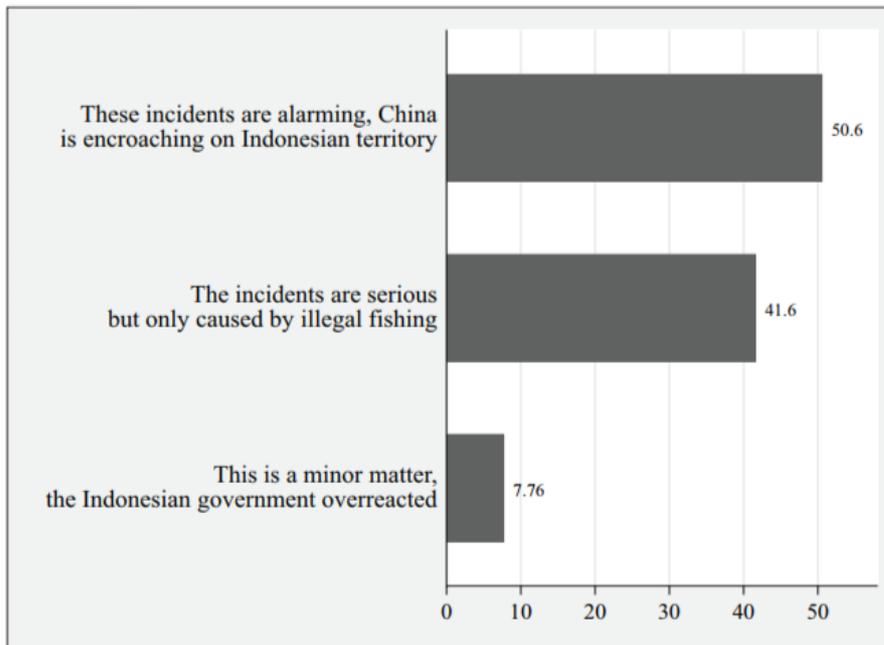
Figure 5: Perception on Indonesians’ preferred position on South China Sea Issue



Source: Diego Fossati et. al, “The Indonesian National Survey Project: Economy, Society, and Politics,” p. 45

²³ Suryadinata and Izzudin, Op. Cit., p. 31.

Figure 6: Perception on recent incidents in Natuna Sea



Source: Diego Fossati et. al, "The Indonesian National Survey Project: Economy, Society, and Politics," p. 46

CONCLUSION

Several conclusions can be drawn from the INSP findings on public perception on China. First, we see that admiration of China has persisted despite widespread circulation of negative sentiments in recent years. However, China is not the most favourable country. Among the countries mentioned in the question (i.e. United States, China, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Australia), China ranked at the bottom. The proportion of those who think that the rise of China will have a positive impact on Indonesia is only slightly higher than of those who think that it will have a negative impact. The majority of the respondents think that having a close economic relationship with China will benefit Indonesia, at least to a certain extent. This demonstrates that trade and economy are what Indonesians view optimistically in their country's relations with China.

The survey also reveals that Indonesians have some tolerance of the Chinese, as evidenced in the way in which they view Chinese migrant workers and investments. Unlike the negative sentiments that have circulated in the media and social media, Indonesians generally welcome the Chinese migrants, as long as the Indonesian government controls the number of migrants and strengthen the entry requirements for migrants. Nevertheless, they will not welcome the migrants if they threaten the job security of the Indonesian workers. Likewise, most of them also welcome Chinese investments, but only in some cases. It is possible that Indonesians in general share the concern that is popular among the elites who take an oppositional stance against Jokowi. These groups worry that increased reliance on Chinese investment will reduce Indonesia's bargaining power.

The INSP data also demonstrate a significant increase in the people’s awareness of the South China Sea issue and the incidents occurring in the waters near Natuna Islands. The reason for such an increase needs to be further researched, but it may be attributed to the increased use in the last few years of social media by Indonesians, as well as recent developments related to the issue. The latter includes the Indonesian military training conducted in Natuna Islands, Jokowi’s visits to Natuna, and the ruling of the tribunal on the South China Sea in July 2016 which was widely discussed in Indonesian media.²⁴ It is important that the Indonesian government address the Natuna incident issue more wisely, if it wishes to prevent public resentment against Jokowi’s administration from rising.

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²⁴ E.g. “Mahkamah Arbitrase Internasional: China Tak Berhak Klaim Seluruh Laut China Selatan” (International Tribunal Court: China Has No Right to Claim All South China Sea) <http://internasional.kompas.com/read/2016/07/12/17095071/mahkamah.arbitrase.internasional.china.tak.berhak.klaim.seluruh.laut.china.selatan> (accessed on 17 November 2017)