

PERSPECTIVE

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Evaluating Indonesian Muslims' Engagement with China

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The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, in collaboration with the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia, sent Indonesian Santris to China to reaffirm Indonesia's contribution to world peace in the "Santri for World Peace, Goes to China" activity in November 2019. (Photo by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, <https://kemlu.go.id/portal/id/read/818/berita/santri-indonesia-goes-to-china-kenalkan-kembali-islam-yang-toleran-dan-penuh-perdamaian>).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In the past decade, China has extensively engaged with Muslim communities in Indonesia, primarily through collaborative efforts with major Islamic organizations. This spans sectors such as religious communication, education, social welfare projects, disaster relief, charity works and medical services.
- From China's perspective, engagements with Islamic communities in Indonesia entail three key aspects: China's Neighbourhood diplomacy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the tradition of faith diplomacy with Indonesia.
- This report examines the motivations and actions of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, suggesting that their engagement with China aligns with their respective goals of promoting Archipelagic Islam and Progressive Islam globally.
- NU's engagement with China underscores its dedication to promoting moderate Islam and nurturing interfaith dialogue to cultivate a distinct identity for Indonesian Islam. As a result, NU accentuates the role of Chinese Muslims in spreading Islam throughout the archipelago through peaceful methods and their shared perspective on harmonious relations between Islamic doctrines and local cultures.
- Muhammadiyah's engagement with China reflects its commitment to adapting Islam to contemporary society and the present era. It regards China as a crucial partner for Indonesia and an emerging global force, despite occasional bilateral frictions.
- Both organizations benefit from their engagement with China to consolidate their respective religious ideologies domestically and to advance their global expansion efforts. Together, they contribute to shaping a more moderate and pluralistic image of Indonesian Islam.

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the increasing interaction between China and Indonesian Islamic communities—exemplified by government scholarships for studies in China, collaborations in higher education and research, exchange visits, disaster relief, charitable donations, and small-scale social welfare projects—prompts an examination of the driving factors behind these engagements.

While much attention has been devoted to scrutinizing China’s strategic interests, little attention has been given to the Indonesian side of the equation. This report endeavours to bridge this gap. It focuses specifically on NU and Muhammadiyah, the largest and second-largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, which wield significant influence over Indonesian Muslim society.

Comprehending Indonesian Islamic groups’ engagement with China necessitates considering the evolving landscape of Indonesian Islamic development. Additionally, the report underscores the importance in this context of considering NU’s and Muhammadiyah’s wish to propagate their respective religious doctrines on a global scale.

A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

Three aspects are particularly useful for understanding China’s recent increasing engagements with the Islamic communities in Indonesia:

China’s Neighbourhood Diplomacy

Over the past decade, bilateral relations between China and Indonesia have deepened significantly. Indonesia has been China’s Comprehensive Strategic Partner since 2013 and holds “a prominent and prioritized position in China’s Neighbourhood Diplomacy agenda”.¹ Against the backdrop of increasing US-China rivalry, Indonesia assumes a crucial role in upholding ASEAN centrality, a stance that aligns with China’s strategic interests.² Consequently, fostering people-to-people connections with Indonesia through various channels, has become increasingly important for China.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The BRI underscores five connectivity pillars, with people-to-people connectivity as the fifth pillar. Deepening engagement with the Indonesian Muslim community constitutes part of these efforts. Additionally, as Indonesia emerges as a new hot spot for Chinese investors,³ China increasingly recognizes the importance of understanding local society, including through religious channels, to navigate the socio-cultural landscape more effectively. Supporting local communities through religious organizations has also become one of the channels through which Chinese companies fulfil their social responsibilities. For instance, PT Kereta Cepat Indonesia China (KCIC) received support from NU during the initial phase of the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway project,⁴ and explored cooperation programmes with Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta regarding lectures and specialized workshops for the faculty of engineering.⁵

Traditions of Faith Diplomacy with Indonesia

Faith diplomacy between China and Indonesia began early in their diplomatic relations and has been reciprocal. During the Asian-African Conference in 1955, also known as the Bandung Conference, the Chinese delegation specifically invited Hui Muslim scholar Da Pusheng and presented copies of albums titled *Muslims in China* to clarify Beijing's stance on its religious policy. During the Soekarno era, many Indonesian Muslims visited China, and New China became a reference point for Indonesia's early modernization endeavours.⁶ After the two countries resumed diplomatic relations in 1990, faith diplomacy also resumed and broadened. Not only has China actively initiated faith diplomacy with Indonesia, but Indonesia has also promoted Santri Diplomacy with China.⁷

Several evaluations indicate that China's engagement with Islamic communities in Indonesia is yielding favourable results. Chinese governmental scholarships have cultivated a generation of young santris,⁸ who often express opinions that differ from those of Western-educated Indonesian students and occasionally advocate for China's core interests.⁹ However, criticisms exist, alleging that China's influence on Indonesian Islamic groups may lead them to avoid discussing Chinese domestic issues.¹⁰

INDONESIAN ISLAMIC MOTIVATIONS

The Reformasi era saw heightened Islamic influence in Indonesian politics. Political polarization along religious lines, especially between 2016–2019, sparked concerns regarding Indonesia's democracy and social cohesion. In response, the state and prominent Indonesian Islamic organizations re-navigated the trajectory for Islam. Key entities such as NU and Muhammadiyah played crucial roles in promoting the principle of *wasathiyah* (the middle way), often interpreted as moderation and tolerance, by advocating their respective doctrines. NU advocates for Archipelagic Islam (*Islam Nusantara*) and Fiqih Peradaban (Fiqh of Civilisation),¹¹ while Muhammadiyah supports Progressive Islam (*Islam Berkemajuan*).

NU's Archipelagic Islam largely refers to the practice of Islam in Indonesia, which aims to harmonize the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah with local traditions. It gained prominence around 2016 during an international conference hosted by NU.¹² Despite some varied interpretations, it underscores the importance of pluralism and inclusiveness to counteract radicalism and extremism. NU believes that Archipelagic Islam can transcend borders and find relevance beyond Indonesia. This belief is manifested in initiatives such as the G20 Religion Forum (R20) founded by NU, and the centennial anniversary of NU.¹³ These platforms promote the principles of pluralism and inclusiveness on a global scale.

Muhammadiyah's Progressive Islam revitalizes the ideas of its founder KH Ahmad Dahlan to bring enlightenment to society. The five key aspects of Progressive Islam are: unification of God (*tauhid*), adherence to the Quran and Sunnah, revival of independent reasoning and renewal to address contemporary issues (*ijtihad* and *tajdid*), emphasis on moderation (*wasathiyah*), and mercy to all creations (*rahmatan lil-a'lamin*).¹⁴ Progressive Islam found rapid development under Dr. Haedar Nashir, Chairman of Muhammadiyah (2015–2027), transforming into a modern and professional organization with an extensive network to face the opportunities and challenges of contemporary society.¹⁵

Despite their differing emphases and approaches, both organizations endorse moderation and inclusivity, striving to shape a positive global image of Indonesian Islam. It is noteworthy that *wasathiyah* is also a fundamental principle practised in Chinese Islam, as evidenced by the Code of Conduct for Islamic Religious Personnel in China.¹⁶ Within this context, both organizations have intensified their global exposure and increased their engagement with various religions, civilizations and peoples, including China.

NU COLLABORATION WITH CHINA TO ADVANCE ISLAM NUSANTARA

NU has embarked on a range of collaborative endeavours with China. These include visits by NU leadership to China, scholarships for study in China, joint projects to improve the living standards of local communities and participating in charitable initiatives like disaster relief and Ramadan donations. In 2017, NU established a specialized branch called the Chinese NU (PCINU *Tiongkok*), which boasted over 600 members by 2020.¹⁷ PCINU published a book titled *Santri Indonesia di Tiongkok* (Indonesian Santris in China), where NU *santris* shared their experiences of living in China, aiming to provide Indonesian society with a deeper understanding of China. China actively promotes Zheng He (Cheng Ho) as a symbol of cultural and religious exchange between the two countries – a stance welcomed by NU, which has organized several seminars on Zheng He.

NU's engagement with China primarily helps consolidate Islam Nusantara in three ways. Firstly, the exchanges explore how the religious elements of Islam Nusantara may have been influenced by Chinese civilization, further establishing its historical and theoretical foundations and highlighting its inclusive characteristics. Secondly, Chinese Islam also has a tradition of localization similar to the principles of Islam Nusantara, fostering mutual support between the two. Thirdly, this cross-border engagement reflects the global dissemination requirements of *Fiqh Peradaban*, the second phase of *Islam Nusantara*.

Throughout NU's engagement with China, a consistent theme has been the exploration of historical connections between China and the early spread of Islam in Indonesia. NU emphasizes the contributions of Chinese migrants to this process. The spread of Islam to Indonesia is theorized to have occurred via multiple routes, as expressed in the Gujarat, Makkah, Persia, and Chinese theories. The Chinese theory suggests that Islam reached Indonesia before the significant influx of Gujarati or Arabian traders, offering an earlier alternative path of exposure.

The role of Chinese ancestry figures in the spread of Islam in Java has been widely discussed. Slamet Muljana highlighted this in his dissertation,¹⁸ supported by NU figures such as Gus Dur, on the Walisongo, key figures in spreading Islam included Sunan Ampel, Sunan Gunung Jati, Sunan Bonang, and Sunan Kalijaga, who were believed to have Chinese heritage. Other notable Chinese Muslim figures in various regions include Syekh Hasanudin, Gang Eng Cu, Swan Liong (Aria Damar), and Lie Beng Ing. Unearthing the history of interactions between the archipelago and China aims to bolster Indonesia's position as one of the early religious-cultural realms of Islam,¹⁹ offering a unique source of influence distinct from the Middle East,²⁰ elevating Indonesia's position in the Islamic world in the process.

Besides, NU supports and shares China's practice of coexistence between Islam and local culture. Islamic practices in China show significant influence from Chinese culture, where a tradition known as "Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism Interpretation of Islamic Doctrines" exists. Both NU and Chinese Islamic thought emphasize strong cultural inclusivity. For instance, traditionalist Muslims in Indonesia have similar practices to those in China, such as visiting holy tombs and making offerings during prayers. Many NU delegations to China visited the Lingshan Islamic Cemetery in Quanzhou (*Makam Sahabat Nabi*) and performed *tahlilan*,²¹ an Islamic ritual to commemorate the deceased. Some Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia integrate Chinese traditional cultural customs into their religious ceremonies. For example, the Pondok Buntet boarding school in Cirebon is renowned for incorporating the Chinese *barongsai* dance into the *walimah khitan* ceremony.²² Through discovering these similar rituals, NU fosters mutual support with China to promote a more harmonious relationship between Islam and local culture.

On a broader scope, NU endorses harmonious relations with other religions and civilizations, aiming to make religions function as "a genuine and dynamic source of solutions"²³ in the 21st century. Islam Nusantara serves to enhance Indonesia's soft power diplomacy,²⁴ finding common ground with China's *Global Civilization Initiative*²⁵ in promoting peace and cross-cultural exchange.²⁶ NU's commitment is underscored by its invitation of Buddhist Master Venerable Yan Jue from China to participate in the R20 summit in 2022, and Taoist Master Hu Chenglin to attend the ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference in 2023.

MUHAMMADIYAH'S ENGAGEMENT WITH CHINA IN PROMOTING PROGRESSIVE ISLAM

Muhammadiyah's interactions with China encompass various categories, with educational collaboration being a prominent domain. As many as 32 Muhammadiyah campuses have collaborated with 23 campuses in China.²⁷ Universitas Ahmad Dahlan consistently enrolls a significant number of Chinese students, particularly from Guangxi Province. In 2016, Muhammadiyah students established the Chinese branch, PCIM Tiongkok, which has since expanded to include 12 regional sub-branches in China.²⁸ Muhammadiyah has deepened its understanding of China through several high-level visits. In 2018, its Central Committee visited China. In 2019, Muhammadiyah leaders, along with NU and MUI representatives, visited Xinjiang. In 2024, a Muhammadiyah delegation visited China to promote educational and healthcare collaborations.²⁹ Regarding religious cooperation, the Chinese Embassy in Indonesia has collaborated with Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta to organize joint iftar and charity donation activities. China has expressed interest in enhancing collaboration with Muhammadiyah in managing the Hajj pilgrimage, as well as in the training of preachers. PCIM Tiongkok has also indicated its desire to partner with Muhammadiyah in supporting the construction of mosques and Islamic schools in China.

Muhammadiyah believes that the organization plays a crucial role in shaping Indonesia's history and future. Its perspective extends beyond domestic boundaries to consider Indonesia and the organization itself within a global context. Therefore, Muhammadiyah's focus is on contemporary China rather than China's historical connections with Indonesia.

Aligned with the principles of Progressive Islam, Muhammadiyah's perception of China reflects the principle of *ijtihad*, demonstrating a dynamic, adaptive and independent-reasoning approach to understanding China. In this context, *ijtihad* involves evaluating China based on a wealth of facts, maintaining an unbiased stance and upholding the principle of *rahmatan lil-a'lamin*.

On a bilateral level, Muhammadiyah recognizes China as a nation with which Indonesia maintains both close cooperative ties and occasional frictions. Muhammadiyah sees China as a developmental model for addressing globalization challenges, especially as a non-Western country that has achieved advanced technology and modernization. For instance, Dr. Haedar Nashir highlights China's advancements in the era of change 4.0 and its advanced status in 5.0.³⁰ Bambang Setiadji, Chair of the Muhammadiyah Council for Higher Education, Research, and Development, advocates learning from China's experiences in poverty reduction.³¹ Thus it is unsurprising that collaborations between the Muhammadiyah network and China predominantly fall within the realms of education and medical services.

However, Muhammadiyah also expresses concerns regarding occasional frictions in China-Indonesian relations, including the impact of Chinese workers on local employment opportunities, controversies surrounding TikTok, and issues like the Rembang Eco-city project, which may directly impact the livelihood of local communities or micro-enterprises in Indonesia. Additionally, Muhammadiyah has raised inquiries regarding China's domestic issues. These concerns are communicated through organizational statements or public remarks by its leaders.

Regarding international political dynamics, Muhammadiyah recognises China as an emerging power in international politics, acknowledging its growing influence on the global stage, and expects China to assume a role commensurate with its global status. Many of Muhammadiyah's leaders and intellectuals perceive China as a rising force in the Asian century and a potent competitor to the West.³² Consequently, they believe China will wield significant influence on global issues, particularly the Palestinian issue.³³ Therefore, they suggest that Indonesia proactively take the initiative in managing relations with China.

Like NU, Muhammadiyah also encourages its cadres to study and live in China to disseminate its Islamic thoughts³⁴ and to establish a positive image of Indonesian Islam. However, Muhammadiyah seems to place greater emphasis on spreading ideas related to humanitarianism, modernisation and Islamic religious rights. In contrast, NU places greater emphasis on promoting intercultural and cross-religious friendly exchanges.

To Muhammadiyah, engaging with China is a deliberate practice of independent reasoning (*ijtihad*), aimed at achieving renewal and development both for the organization and the nation (*tajdid*). Proactively interacting with a non-Islamic civilization embodies the principle of moderation (*wasatiyah*). These efforts are grounded in adherence to Islamic doctrines and a concern for all societies. It can be concluded that Muhammadan's engagement with China is a self-conscious practice to promote Progressive Islam. However, compared to NU, Muhammadiyah's connections with China are relatively limited and more recent.

CONCLUSION

As China's collaboration with Indonesian Muslim society grows, it is crucial to analyse the phenomenon from both Chinese and Indonesian perspectives. To China, engaging with Indonesian Muslim society is both a diplomatic tradition and a renewed approach to garner favour from Indonesian society, especially against the backdrop of the BRI and the evolving global geopolitical situation. It is however, equally important to examine these interactions from the Indonesian Muslim perspective. Without considering the evolving discourses in Indonesian Islam, we risk overlooking the agency of Indonesian Islamic communities.

Within the framework of Indonesia's globally expanding Islam and its moderate identity, NU and Muhammadiyah actively engage with China to advance their respective religious doctrines, despite differing focal points. NU's engagement with China seeks largely to rediscover historical connections, including the Chinese contribution to the early dissemination of Islam in the archipelago; this is aimed at elevating Indonesia's position in the Islamic world, promoting their shared goal of forging a harmonious relationship between Islamic doctrines and local culture, and fostering inter-religious and inter-civilizational peace. Meanwhile, Muhammadiyah observes, evaluates, and interacts with contemporary China to draw inspiration and knowledge, to fulfil its responsibility for social renewal in Indonesia. Thus, these two organizations respectively showcase different facets of Indonesia's Islamic image, and contribute towards establishing a positive international image of Indonesian Islam.

ENDNOTES

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