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From Indonesia to China: The Evolving Landscape of Santri Diplomacy

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Abstract

This paper critically explores the evolution, challenges, and unique characteristics of santri diplomacy in the context of China. While globally, Indonesian Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah have institutionalized santri-driven diplomacy, the Chinese context reveals a different pattern. Due to China's strict regulations on religious expression and activities, santri diplomacy in this setting operates primarily through cultural channels rather than overt religious advocacy. In China, individual santri—particularly students, scholars, and members of the Indonesian diaspora—serve as informal cultural ambassadors. Utilizing digital platforms and social media, these actors promote a positive image of Indonesia, initiate people-to-people exchanges, and foster intercultural understanding. Their activities include organizing cultural events, academic collaborations, and sharing narratives about Indonesia's pluralistic Islam. These efforts reflect a shift from institutional diplomacy to personalized, grassroots cultural diplomacy. A distinctive feature of santri diplomacy in China is its “reverse advocacy” function: many santri seek

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to counter the often negative or simplistic portrayals of China's religious environment in Indonesian media. By offering nuanced explanations and first-hand perspectives, they aim to reduce public misunderstanding and foster more balanced views among Indonesian Muslims. As diplomatic, economic, and educational relations between Indonesia and China deepen, the strategic importance of santri diplomacy will likely increase. To maximize its impact, it is essential to support santri actors through institutional recognition, capacity-building programs, and collaborative frameworks involving Islamic organizations, the Indonesian government, and educational institutions. Empowering these cultural agents will ensure that santri diplomacy continues to serve as a bridge of understanding in a complex geopolitical landscape.

Keyword: China-Indonesia relations, Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, Santri diplomacy.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji secara kritis perkembangan, tantangan, dan karakteristik khas diplomasi santri dalam konteks Tiongkok. Secara global, organisasi Islam Indonesia seperti Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) dan Muhammadiyah telah menginstitutionalisasi diplomasi berbasis santri. Namun, konteks Tiongkok menunjukkan pola yang berbeda. Karena ketatnya regulasi terhadap ekspresi dan aktivitas keagamaan, diplomasi santri di Tiongkok lebih mengandalkan jalur budaya daripada dakwah keagamaan secara terbuka. Di Tiongkok, para santri—khususnya mahasiswa, cendekiawan, dan diaspora Indonesia—berperan sebagai duta budaya informal. Melalui platform digital dan media sosial, mereka mempromosikan citra positif Indonesia, menginisiasi pertukaran antarwarga, dan membangun pemahaman lintas budaya. Aktivitas mereka mencakup penyelenggaraan acara budaya, kolaborasi akademik, serta berbagi narasi tentang Islam Indonesia yang inklusif dan pluralistik. Ini menunjukkan pergeseran dari diplomasi institusional menuju diplomasi budaya berbasis akar rumput. Salah satu ciri khas diplomasi santri di Tiongkok adalah fungsi “advokasi balik”: para santri kerap meluruskan gambaran negatif atau simplistik tentang lingkungan keagamaan di Tiongkok yang muncul di media Indonesia. Melalui penjelasan yang lebih bernuansa dan berdasarkan pengalaman langsung, mereka membantu mengurangi kesalahpahaman dan membentuk persepsi yang lebih seimbang di kalangan Muslim Indonesia. Seiring semakin eratnya hubungan diplomatik, ekonomi, dan pendidikan antara Indonesia dan Tiongkok, pentingnya diplomasi santri akan terus meningkat. Untuk mengoptimalkan peran ini, perlu dukungan kelembagaan, pelatihan kapasitas, dan kemitraan antara organisasi Islam, pemerintah Indonesia, dan institusi pendidikan. Pemberdayaan santri sebagai agen budaya akan memastikan diplomasi santri tetap menjadi jembatan pemahaman di tengah lanskap geopolitik yang kompleks.

Kata kunci: Diplomasi Santri, Hubungan Cina-Indonesia, Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama

تتناول هذه الورقة بالدراسة النقدية تطوّر دبلوماسية السان تري في السياق الصيني، والتحديات التي تواجهها، وخصائصها الفريدة. فعلى المستوى العالمي، قامت منظمات إسلامية إندونيسية مثل نهضة العلماء والمحمدية بإضفاء الطابع المؤسسي على دبلوماسية السان تري، ولكن السياق الصيني يُظهر نمطًا مختلفًا. بسبب القيود الصارمة المفروضة على التعبير والأنشطة الدينية، تعتمد دبلوماسية السان تري في الصين بشكل رئيسي على القنوات الثقافية بدلاً من الدعوة الدينية المباشرة.

في الصين، يعمل السان تريون—وخاصة الطلاب والعلماء وأفراد الجالية الإندونيسية—كسفراء ثقافيين غير رسميين. من خلال المنصات الرقمية ووسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، يروجون لصورة إيجابية عن إندونيسيا، ويبدؤون بتبادلات شعبية، ويعززون الفهم المتبادل بين الثقافات. تشمل أنشطتهم تنظيم فعاليات ثقافية، والتعاون الأكاديمي، ومشاركة القصص حول إسلام إندونيسيا التعددي والمفتوح. هذا التحول يمثل انتقالًا من الدبلوماسية المؤسسية إلى دبلوماسية ثقافية قائمة على المبادرات الشعبية.

ومن الخصائص البارزة لدبلوماسية السان تري في الصين، "الدفاع العكسي"، حيث يسعى العديد منهم لتصحيح الصور السلبية أو المبسطة عن البيئة الدينية في الصين المنتشرة في الإعلام الإندونيسي. ومن خلال تفسيرات دقيقة وتجارب مباشرة، يسعون لتقليل سوء الفهم وتقديم صورة أكثر توازنًا للمسلمين الإندونيسيين.

مع تعمق العلاقات بين إندونيسيا والصين في المجالات الدبلوماسية والاقتصادية والتعليمية، تزداد الأهمية الاستراتيجية لدبلوماسية السان تري. ولهذا، من الضروري دعم هؤلاء الفاعلين ثقافيًا من خلال الاعتراف المؤسسي، وبناء القدرات، والتعاون بين المنظمات الإسلامية والحكومة والمؤسسات التعليمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية/الرئيسية: دبلوماسية سان تري، العلاقات الصينية الإندونيسية، نهضة العلماء، المحمدية

1. Introduction

As the world's largest Muslim-majority country, Islam has consistently been a key component of Indonesia's foreign policy.¹ Following the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent global war on terror, Indonesia strategically highlighted the role of moderate Islam in its public diplomacy, aiming to counter terrorism and extremism while enhancing its soft power. This emphasis was particularly evident during the administrations of Presidents Megawati and Yudhoyono, a period when Indonesia experienced several terrorist attacks, and has continued under President Joko Widodo. Today, Indonesia has successfully projected an international image of a moderate Islam, where religion and democracy, as well as Islam and other faiths, co-exist peacefully. Santri diplomacy—broadly defined as public diplomacy conducted by devout Muslims—has become increasingly visible in shaping this image, evolving from grassroots initiatives to receiving more formal recognition. Despite its growing prominence in practice, the concept, practice, and implications of santri diplomacy have yet to receive substantial scholarly attention.

Santri diplomacy, traditionally associated with Indonesia's relations with Muslim-majority countries, is increasingly playing a prominent role in shaping Indonesia- China relations, despite the more secular nature of governance and society in China. Under President Joko Widodo's leadership,

¹ Anwar, D. F. (2010). Foreign Policy, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia. *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences & Humanities*, 3. 37-54.

bilateral relations between Indonesia and China have seen substantial progress, particularly in the realms of infrastructure development, investment, and trade. Concurrently, people-to-people exchanges have deepened, including the growing participation of santris in educational pursuits within China. A significant number of Indonesian santri students have enrolled in Chinese educational institutions, and major Indonesian Islamic organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, have established branches in China. Additionally, frequent visits by Indonesian Islamic organizations and universities have facilitated various forms of collaboration with their Chinese counterparts. These developments prompt important inquiries into the role of santri diplomacy as a distinct form of public diplomacy in shaping the broader trajectory of China-Indonesia relations.

Building on this context, this article aims to provide an overview of the practice of santri diplomacy in China and assess its impact on China-Indonesia relations. Specifically, it addresses the following key questions: How can santri diplomacy be defined, and what is its relevance in the framework of China-Indonesia relations? Who are the primary actors involved in santri diplomacy, and in which areas do their public diplomacy activities primarily take place? What is the motivation behind the actors? What is the relationship between santri diplomacy and formal, first-track diplomacy? Furthermore, what role does the religious dimension of santri diplomacy play in shaping interactions with China, where religion holds a less prominent position in state affairs? Finally, to what extent does santri diplomacy contribute to the overall dynamics of China-Indonesia relations?

2. Literature Review

Research on santri diplomacy is still in its early stages. The term "santri" has multiple origins, one being the Sanskrit word "susantri," meaning a religious student or a traveler carrying a holy book.² It may also derive from the Sanskrit "sastri," meaning literacy, reflecting the santri's religious knowledge. Additionally, it could have Javanese roots in the word "cantrik," meaning a person who always follows and learns from a guru.³ Historically, santri have seen themselves as intellectuals and defenders of orthodox faith, preserving sacred laws from traditional customs.⁴ In practice, santri are typically associated with individuals educated in traditional Islamic boarding schools, or *pesantren*.

Santri can be categorized based on their approach to and understanding of Islam. Conventionally, Indonesian santris can be categorized into traditionalist santri and modernist santri.⁵ Traditionalist santri emphasize preserving established traditions and integrating them with Islamic teachings, while modernist santri focus on directly referring to authoritative texts, such as the Qur'an and Hadith, to guide their religious practice. Machmudi argues that the end of the Cold War and the emergence of Islamic transnational movements gave rise to new categories of Indonesian santri: convergent, radical, and global.⁶ Both

² Mashad, D. (2021). *Politik Kaum Santri dan Abangan*. Pustaka Al-Kautsar.

³ Rosyadi, K. (2020). Mystification of the Highest Power: A case of Indonesia. *RUDN Journal of Sociology*, 20(3):498–508.

⁴ Geertz, C. (2013). *Agama Jawa: Abangan, Santri, Priyayi dalam Kebudayaan Jawa*. Komunitas Bambu.

⁵ Mashad, D. (2021). *Politik Kaum Santri dan Abangan*. Pustaka Al-Kautsar.

⁶ Machmudi, Y. (2008). The Emergence of New Santri in Indonesia. *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 2(1):69–

traditionalist and modernist santri fall under the convergent category, as their religious thoughts and movements began to align in the 1970s due to Soeharto's repression of Islamic political participation. This convergence helps to explain why, during the reformasi era, various types of santri often collaborate in public diplomacy to pursue common objectives.

The two types of santri are respectively represented by NU for the traditionalist group and Muhammadiyah for the modernist group. Consequently, NU and Muhammadiyah are the primary civil organizations involved in santri diplomacy. Other organizations, including MUI, also play a role in promoting santri diplomacy. Notably, OIC Youth Indonesia has actively contributed by establishing the Santri Diplomacy Academy in Indonesia.⁷

Santri diplomacy is situated within the broader field of public diplomacy, which involves direct engagement with foreign populations to promote national interests and policy objectives.⁸ More specifically, it aligns with citizen diplomacy, which transcends state-centrism approaches, enabling individuals to engage in areas like human rights, climate change, and cultural exchange.⁹ Although a specific definition of santri diplomacy is not yet established, it can be minimally defined as a kind of citizen diplomacy conducted by santri to advance Indonesia's national interests and shape a favorable image of Indonesia. This image often emphasizes peace-loving, tolerant, and moderate Islam, as well as its compatibility with democracy.¹⁰

The objectives of contemporary santri diplomacy usually include conflict management, countering terrorism and extremism, disseminating religious ideas, shaping Indonesia's image, among other goals. In conflict management, NU and Muhammadiyah have taken the lead in addressing global and regional conflicts, particularly those involving inter-religious groups. They partner with local Islamic organizations to foster inter-religious dialogue and offer humanitarian assistance, supported by the positive reputation of Indonesian Islam for its moderation and commitment to promoting peace. Since 2009, Muhammadiyah has engaged in peace efforts in southern Thailand and the southern Philippines.¹¹ Muhammadiyah is known for swiftly providing humanitarian assistance.¹² Similarly, NU has played a significant role in conflicts across

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⁷ Prasetyo, A. D. (2023). Santri Diplomacy Academy dan OIC Youth Indonesia Audiensi ke Direktur Diplomas Publik Kemenlu RI. <https://jakarta.hallo.id/metropolitan/23010264363/santri-diplomacy-academy-dan-oic-youth-indonesia-audiensi-ke-direktur-diplomasi-publik-kemenlu-ri>

⁸ Snow, N. (2020). Rethinking Public Diplomacy in the 2020s. In *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, pages 3–12. Routledge.

⁹ Fulda, A. (2019). The Emergence of Citizen Diplomacy in European Union–China Relations: Principles, Pillars, Pioneers, Paradoxes. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 30(1):188–216.

¹⁰ Hoesterey, J. B. (2018). Public Diplomacy and the Global Dissemination of “Moderate Islam”. In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia*, pages 406–416. Routledge.

¹¹ Nubowo, A. (2023). Promoting Indonesian Moderate Islam on the Global Stage: Non- state Actor's Power Diplomacy in the Post-New Order Era. *Muslim Politics Review*, 2(2):238–283.

¹² Husein, R., Kurniawan, B. D., and Kurniawati, N. (2024). Humanitarian Diplomacy in Action: Examining Muhammadiyah as a Model for Faith-based Organizational Engagement. *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional*, 13(1):1–

various countries, including Thailand, the Philippines, South Korea, Sudan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine-Israel, Iran, and Iraq.¹³ Both organizations have also participated in peace initiatives in Afghanistan. NU has been particularly active due to its credibility in promoting Islamic moderation and its partnership with the Indonesian government.¹⁴

In countering terrorism and extremism, the Indonesian government has not only implemented legislative and enforcement measures but has also adopted an ideological approach to neutralize extremist ideologies. President Megawati called on NU and Muhammadiyah to support the fight against terrorism by promoting Islam as a peace-loving and cooperative religion. This effort intensified during the Yudhoyono administration,¹⁵ when the government adopted an all-direction foreign policy and actively involved Islamic groups in public diplomacy. Both NU and Muhammadiyah have embraced the state ideology of Pancasila and assert that Islam and nationalism are compatible, opposing the establishment of a caliphate in Indonesia.¹⁶ Both organizations employ formal and informal approaches to prevent radicalism, including educational institutions, religious lectures, online preaching and persuasive dialogues.¹⁷

In the dissemination of religious ideas, santri diplomacy carries distinct missions based on the Islamic organizations they represent. The founding of NU in 1926 was rooted in the efforts of the Hijaz Committee, a group of influential Indonesian Muslim scholars who petitioned King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia to protest his discriminatory policies against non-Wahhabi Muslims following his conquest of Hijaz.¹⁸ This initiative, marking an early phase of santri diplomacy, led to the formal establishment of NU. The spirit of the Hijaz Committee has since been preserved as a core religious message, emphasizing *tawasuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), and *tasyawur* (deliberation). *Tawasuth* encourages harmonizing local customs with Islamic teachings while rejecting extremism.¹⁹ *Tasamuh* fosters appreciation for Indonesia's diversity and promotes dialogue and cooperation.²⁰ *Tawazun* emphasizes

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¹³ Nubowo, A. (2023). Promoting Indonesian Moderate Islam on the Global Stage: Non- state Actor's Power Diplomacy in the Post-New Order Era. *Muslim Politics Review*, 2(2):238–283.

¹⁴ Pratama, E. G. et al. (2021). Religion and Public Diplomacy: The Role of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia-Afghanistan Peace Agenda. *Jurnal Penelitian*, 18(1): 1–12.

¹⁵ Muhammad, A. (2014). Indonesia's Way to Counter Terrorism 2002—2009: Lesson Learned. *Journal of Government and Politics*, 5(2): 190–197.

¹⁶ Zamani, D. A. and Hamidah, T. (2021). Islam dan Pancasila dalam Perdebatan Ormas-ormas Islam. *Risalah: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Studi Islam*, 7(1):28–43.

¹⁷ Haris, M. A. (2020). The View and Concept of Deradicalization Religion Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Perspective. *Risalah*, 6(2):305–318. And Putri, R. and Sari, R. (2012). Anti Terrorism Cooperation between the National Agency for Contra Terrorism and Civil Society: Study Case of Muhammadiyah Disengagement. *Journal Defence Management*, 2(111):1–12.

¹⁸ NU Online (2012). *Komite Hijaz*. NU Online. <https://www.nu.or.id/nasional/komite-hijaz-bqouE>

¹⁹ Masaaki, O. (2020). Anatomy of the Islam Nusantara Program and the Necessity for a “Critical” Islam Nusantara study. *Islam Nusantara: Journal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture*, 1(1):13–40.

²⁰ Arifianto, A. R. (2021). *Indonesian Democracy Needs a Moderate Nahdlatul Ulama*. East Asia Forum.

balance in social, political, and economic life to achieve justice and prosperity.²¹ *Tasyawur* highlights the value of deliberation and community participation in decision-making, prioritizing a democratic approach to organizational and societal management.²² In contrast, Muhammadiyah's religious philosophy is rooted in *Islam Berkemajuan* (Progressive Islam). Dr. Haedar Nashir, Chairman of Muhammadiyah (2015-2027), identifies five key characteristics of Progressive Islam: *tauhid* (the unification of God), adherence to the Quran and Sunnah, revival of *ijtihad* or independent reasoning and *tajdid* (purification and development), promotion of *wasathiyah* (moderation), and the embodiment of *rahmatan lil-a'lamin* (a presence that fosters peace and compassion for humanity and the universe).²³ These differences in religious thought are reflected in the actions of the two organizations' members within santri diplomacy. Santri connected to NU still promote the contextualization of Islam, which encourages the coexistence of local cultural practices with Islamic teachings. NU aims for its religious doctrine Nusantara Islam to transcend borders and remain relevant beyond Indonesia, fostering both intra-religious and inter-religious harmonization.²⁴ In contrast, santri affiliated with Muhammadiyah emphasize the need to restore the authenticity of Islam and adapt it to contemporary challenges and opportunities.

In shaping Indonesia's image and supporting the country's foreign policy, santri diplomacy has been mobilized since the early days of Indonesia's independence, with santri largely cooperating with government initiatives. During President Soekarno's era, particularly at the height of the Non-Aligned Movement, santri, especially those affiliated with NU, played a key role in establishing the Asian-African Islamic Conference. This trans regional Islamic forum aimed to strengthen solidarity and cooperation between Muslim communities across Asia and Africa.²⁵ During the *Reformasi* era, President Abdurrahman Wahid, an influential NU santri, encouraged both traditionalist and modernist santri to engage in public diplomacy. Notably, his foreign minister, Dr. Alwi Abdurrahman Shihab, also an influential santri, actively promoted inclusive Islam and interfaith dialogue. This marked the beginning of a tradition where santri involvement in public diplomacy became integral to Indonesia's foreign policy. Since the Megawati administration, both traditionalist and modernist santri have increasingly aligned with the government's efforts to present Indonesia as a Muslim-majority nation that embodies peace, moderation, diversity, and

<https://eastasiaforum.org/2021/11/02/indonesian-democracy-needs-a-moderate-nahdlatul-ulama/>

²¹ Van Bruinessen, M. (2013). Introduction: Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam and the "Conservative Turn" of the Early Twenty-first Century. In *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam*, pages 1–20. ISEAS Publishing.

²² Hefner, R. W. (2011). *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*. Princeton University Press.

²³ Persyarikatan Muhammadiyah (2024). *Haedar Paparkan Lima Ciri Islam Berkemajuan*. Muhammadiyah. <https://muhammadiyah.or.id/haedar-paparkan-lima-ciri-islam-berkemajuan/>

²⁴ Kato, H. (2021). The Islam Nusantara Movement in Indonesia. In *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements*, pages 110–128. Brill.

²⁵ Tho Seeth, A. (2023). *Indonesia's Islamic Peace Diplomacy: Crafting a Role Model for Moderate Islam*. <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/indonesia-s-islamic-peace-diplomacy-crafting-role-model-for-moderate-islam>

democracy, reflecting the country's official stance on the global stage.²⁶

To deepen the discussion, it is important to explore the distinctions between santri diplomacy and related concepts, particularly faith-based diplomacy. Faith-based diplomacy focuses on integrating religious perspectives into conflict resolution and peacemaking efforts.²⁷ While these concepts may overlap, they are distinct: faith diplomacy addresses religious issues, whereas santri diplomacy emphasizes the role of the agent - santri - in public diplomacy, which may not always be directly related to religion. In addition to its overlap with faith-based diplomacy, santri diplomacy is related to Indonesia's diaspora diplomacy. Diaspora refers to a transnational network that enhances nation-state capacities and is increasingly seen as a soft-power resource.²⁸ The Indonesian government has launched programs to leverage the potential of an estimated 8 million overseas Indonesians,²⁹ aiming to maximize contributions through skills, remittances, and investments.³⁰ However, the mobilization of the Indonesian diaspora, particularly the devout Muslim diaspora, in contributing to the country's public diplomacy and soft power has not been adequately analyzed.

Regarding the relationship between Indonesian diplomatic institutions and santri diplomacy, or the interplay between first-track and second-track diplomacy, while santri diplomacy occasionally appears on the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website—especially after President Joko Widodo sought NU's support, leading to the incorporation of Islam Nusantara into the Ministry's programs and messaging³¹—it has not yet become a formal part of Indonesian diplomatic vocabulary and is absent from official documents or high-level statements. The Directorate of Public Diplomacy within the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs primarily handles matters related to santri diplomacy. Some Indonesian diplomats support santri diplomacy voluntarily, likely due to their strong religious convictions or close ties with religious organizations. For example, Arifi Saiman, the Consul General of Indonesia in New York, authored *Diplomasi Santri*,³² the first comprehensive book on the topic. Additionally, Indonesian Ambassador to Lebanon Hajriyanto Y. Thohari has supported Muhammadiyah's humanitarian efforts by establishing a Muhammadiyah-Lazismu school. Ambassador and prominent NU intellectual Zuhairi Misrawi has also

²⁶ Umar, A. R. M. (2016). A Genealogy of Moderate Islam: Governmentality and Discourses of Islam in Indonesia's Foreign Policy. *Studia Islamika*, 23(3): 399–434.

²⁷ Cox, B. and Philpott, D. (2003). Faith-based Diplomacy: An Ancient Idea Newly Emergent. *The Brandywine Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 1(2):31–40. And Thompson, L. (2015). Religion and Diplomacy. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 10(2):197–214.

²⁸ Kennedy, L. (2020). Diaspora and Diplomacy. In *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, pages 213–223. Routledge.

²⁹ Setijadi, C. (2017). *Harnessing the Potential of the Indonesian Diaspora*. ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. <https://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg/publication/2283>

³⁰ Naufanita, H., Yudono, R. M., and Soetjipto, A. (2018). Analisis Wacana Diaspora Indonesia: Tinjauan Konseptual dalam Hubungan Internasional. *Jurnal Kajian Wilayah*, 9(2):90–108.

³¹ Schaefer, S. (2021). Islam Nusantara: The Conceptual Vocabulary of Indonesian Diversity. *Islam Nusantara: Journal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture*, 2(2):1–16.

³² Saiman, A. (2022). *Diplomasi Santri*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama.

been active in introducing *Pancasila* and Indonesian Islam to the Tunisian public,³³ among other initiatives.

Regarding the practice of santri diplomacy in China, research remains limited. Suryadinata argues that santri who study in China have adopted a pro-China perspective, which may challenge the views of Western-educated, pro-Western Indonesian students.³⁴ Some scholars suggest this phenomenon is primarily a result of China's religious diplomacy, designed to win over Indonesian Muslims.³⁵ However, Yeremia offers a contrasting view, noting that a growing number of progressive Indonesian santri students have made a deliberate choice to study in China,³⁶ aiming to bridge gaps between Indonesian Muslim society and mainland China, while also crafting favorable narratives about China. Xue supports this view, highlighting the agency of both NU and Muhammadiyah in their strategic engagement with China.³⁷

3. Research Method

The research methodology of this study is divided into two parts. In the first section, a comprehensive and critical analysis of the theoretical foundations and current state of research on santri diplomacy is conducted through the review of secondary literature. The empirical section of the study relies on the collection of primary data through interviews and document analysis. Interviews were conducted in 2024 with current and former Indonesian diplomats stationed in China, as well as representatives from NU and Muhammadiyah, and santri who are either currently or have previously studied in China. Additionally, primary documents were gathered from websites of key institutions, including the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, NU, Muhammadiyah, and other relevant sources concerning santri diplomacy in China.

4. Finding and Discussion

In the context of China-Indonesia relations, santri diplomacy refers to public diplomacy efforts undertaken by santri, either studying or working in China, or who have previously done so. These activities occur independently of any specific Islamic organization. This section offers a concise overview of santri diplomacy with China, detailing the primary actors involved, their motivations, key objectives, and the interplay with formal (track one) diplomacy. Additionally, the current state of santri diplomacy and the challenges it faces will be examined.

³³ Nubowo, A. (2023). Promoting Indonesian Moderate Islam on the Global Stage: Non- state Actor's Power Diplomacy in the Post-New Order Era. *Muslim Politics Review*, 2(2):238–283.

³⁴ Suryadinata, L. (2023). *China's Islamic Diplomacy in Indonesia is Seeing Results*. <https://thediomat.com/2023/08/chinas-educational-soft-power-is-seeing-results-in-indonesia/>.

³⁵ Rakhmat, M. Z. (2022). Getting Nods from the Muslims: China's Muslim Diplomacy in Indonesia. *International Journal of China Studies*, 13(2):237–264.

³⁶ Yeremia, A. E. (2024). Seek Knowledge as Far as China. In *Rising China's Soft Power in Southeast Asia: Impact on Education and Popular Culture*, page 161.

³⁷ Xue, S. (2024). *Evaluating Indonesian Muslims' Engagement with China*. ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2024-64-evaluating-indonesian-muslims-engagement-with-china-by-xue-song/>

a. Actors

Key actors in santri diplomacy with China include both Indonesian religious organizations and individual santri. NU and Muhammadiyah are the primary organizations, having each established branches there and actively participating in these efforts. Muhammadiyah students launched the PCIM China branch in 2016, which has since expanded to 12 regional sub-branches.³⁸ Similarly, NU students established the PCINU China branch in 2017, which had over 600 members by 2020.³⁹ Since their inception, PCIM China and PCINU China have established connections with each other and have also forged ties with Indonesian institutions in China, as well as religious and educational organizations in China, for instance, the China Islamic Association (CIA).⁴⁰

Both NU and Muhammadiyah institutions in Indonesia, including their central committee and extensive networks of educational and healthcare facilities, engage in santri diplomacy with China as well. The central committee of NU (PBNU) has engaged with collaboration with China for a long time, encompassing charitable activities, disaster relief, the construction of small-scale infrastructure through NU institutions, and educational cooperation. PBNU involves China in its endeavor of promoting *Islam Nusantara* and *Fiqh Peradaban* globally, inviting representatives of various religious groups from China to participate, for instance, Buddhist Master Venerable Yan Jue to participate in the R20 summit in 2022, and Taoist Master Hu Chenglin to attend the ASEAN Intercultural and Inter-religious Dialogue Conference in 2023.⁴¹ The Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) associated with NU are more directly involved in santri diplomacy with China. A notable example is East Java's Pesantren Nurul Jadid, which has brought in Chinese teachers to offer Mandarin courses. Over 200 of its graduates have received scholarships to pursue studies in China. The success of Nurul Jadid has inspired other *pesantren*, such as Bahrul Ulum Besuk, Badridduja Kraksaan (Probolinggo), Maktuba al-Majidiyah (Madura), and Nurul Jadid (Bali), to follow suit.⁴² Compared to PBNU, the central committee of Muhammadiyah (PP Muhammadiyah) has less extensive ties with China, but it has nonetheless strengthened its understanding of China through a few high-level visits and joint charity activities with the Chinese embassy in Indonesia. In contrast, Muhammad-affiliated universities maintain closer relations with China. According to Nur Mutia and de Archellie, 32

³⁸ Mawardi, I., Hayati, N. N., Mudzakir, M., Sos, S., et al. (2022). *Internasionalisasi Muhammadiyah: Sejarah dan Dinamika Pimpinan Cabang Istimewa Muhammadiyah Luar Negeri 2002-2022*. Samudra Biru.

³⁹ NU Online (2020). *PCINU Tiongkok Kenalkan Islam Moderat di Negeri Tirai Bambu*. NU Online. <https://www.nu.or.id/internasional/pcinu-tiongkok-kenalkan-islam-moderat-di-negeri-tirai-bambu-2-ry28z>

⁴⁰ Hamdi, M., Ainy, R. N., Maruf, F., et al. (2023). Empowering PCIM China through the Establishment of a Productive Social Business to Promote the Risalah Islam Berkemajuan in the International World. *Jurnal Pemberdayaan: Publikasi Hasil Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat*, 7(3):70–76.

⁴¹ Xue, S. (2024). *Evaluating Indonesian Muslims' Engagement with China*. ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2024-64-evaluating-indonesian-muslims-engagement-with-china-by-xue-song/>

⁴² Budiman, A. (2024). *Belajar Bahasa Mandarin di Pesantren, Mengapa Tidak?*. VoA Indonesia. <https://www.voaindonesia.com/a/belajar-bahasa-mandarin-di-pesantren-mengapa-tidak-/7778758.html>

Muhammadiyah campuses have established collaborations with 23 Chinese universities.⁴³

In addition to NU and Muhammadiyah, other Indonesian Islamic organizations actively engage with China, including the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI, *Majelis Ulama Indonesia*), the Institute for the Friendship of Islamic Organizations (LPOI, *Lembaga Persahabatan Ormas Islam*), the Indonesian Chinese Islamic Association (PITI, *Persatuan Islam Tionghoa Indonesia*) and a few Islamic boarding schools etc. However, since these organizations do not have branches in China, their activities primarily take place within Indonesia, such as through exchanges and collaborations with the Chinese missions in Indonesia, Chinese companies, and educational partnerships with Chinese institutions.

At the individual level, as China has become a popular destination for Indonesian students, most santri engaged in santri diplomacy are students rather than migrant workers. According to the Chinese Embassy in Indonesia, the number of Indonesian students in China reached 14,000 in 2017, making China the second most popular overseas education destination.⁴⁴ Among these students are santri who actively bridge the gaps between the two societies. Notable examples include Novi Basuki and Farhan Sembiring, who frequently feature on the *Asumsi* and *Cha Guan* YouTube channels, introducing China to Indonesian society. Their content attracts millions of views, leveraging their understanding of what resonates with Indonesian audiences and their familiarity with China, which enhances their credibility. It is noteworthy that the rise of social media has significantly amplified the role of individual santri in contemporary public diplomacy.

b. Motivations

Motivations for engaging in santri diplomacy with China vary across organizations and individuals. Despite frequent denials, NU and Muhammadiyah are often perceived as being in a competitive relationship, especially regarding their international expansion efforts. Both organizations harbor ambitions for global outreach, not limited to Muslim-majority countries, although neither has formulated a formal global expansion strategy. For both, China has emerged as a key player that cannot be overlooked. Anwar Abbas, Chairman of PP Muhammadiyah, stated that China is poised to emerge as a new superpower.⁴⁵ Imam Addaruqutni, Chairman of International Relations and Cooperation of Muhammadiyah, noted that Indonesia-China relations have experienced a "political romance," with periods of brightness (Old Order), darkness (New Order), and renewed brightness (Reformation).⁴⁶

Xue (2024) argues that NU and Muhammadiyah engage with China to advance their respective

⁴³ Nur Mutia, R. T. and de Archellie, R. (2023). Reassessing China's Soft Power in Indonesia: A Critical Overview on China's Cultural Soft Power. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 10(1):1–14.

⁴⁴ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Indonesia (2017). *Mr. Sun Weide, Chargé d'affaires Discusses China-Indonesia Bilateral Relations and the 19th CPC National Congress at Kuningan University*. http://id.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgdt/201712/t20171206_2048906.htm

⁴⁵ Suara Muhammadiyah (2023). *PCIM Tiongkok Adakan Audiensi dengan PP Muhammadiyah dan Kedubes RRT*. <https://www.suaramuhammadiyah.id/read/pcim-tiongkok-adakan-audiensi-dengan-pp-muhammadiyah-dan-kedubes-rrt>

⁴⁶ Interview with Imam Addaruqutni on June 12th, 2024 in Jakarta.

religious doctrines. NU's engagement strengthens Islam Nusantara by exploring historical influences from Chinese civilization, emphasizing its inclusive nature. Chinese Islam's tradition of localization further aligns with the principles of Islam Nusantara, while cross-border exchanges aid the global dissemination of *Fiqh Peradaban*. For Muhammadiyah, China's rise as a global power is seen as significant for international issues like Palestine. Moreover, Muhammadiyah values China's modernization and seeks pragmatic collaboration in areas such as healthcare and education.

At the individual level, Yeremia explores the self-serving motivations of santri through fieldwork at Nurul Jadid pesantren in East Java, known for its Mandarin instruction and a significant number of santri studying in China. Many alumni actively foster social connections with China and influence Indonesian Muslims' perceptions of the country.⁴⁷ Yeremia identifies the primary motivation for pesantren engagement with China as the pursuit of increased student enrollment, despite the reputation risks posed by China's association with communism, which is banned in Indonesia, and prevailing negative perceptions of China. As a result, alumni have become particularly active in addressing and correcting misconceptions about China, especially regarding religious rights. To assert that they remain devout Muslims despite living in a communist country, they often emphasize their religious experiences in China. Many cite the Hadith saying, "pursue knowledge even if it is to the land of China (*tuntutlah ilmu walaupun ke negeri China*)", to justify their decision to study in China, framing it as a pursuit of knowledge consistent with Islamic teachings.⁴⁸

c. Objectives

Among the conventional objectives of santri diplomacy, the primary objectives with China are to shape Indonesia's image as a moderate Muslim-majority country, disseminate religious ideas, and, to a lesser extent, support China's efforts in countering terrorism and extremism.

Regarding Indonesia's soft power development, the focus of the actors is on shaping the image of Indonesian Islam as moderate and respecting local culture, rather than emphasizing its compatibility with democracy or other aspects. Ahmad Musyaffa, a postgraduate student at the South China University of Technology in Guangzhou and an administrator of PCINU China, acknowledged that the primary motivation for his active involvement in diplomatic activities was to realize the values of Islam, which emphasize peace, equality, and justice. Demonstrating these values in practice is crucial for building the image of Indonesian society, where the majority are moderate Muslims who respect differences.⁴⁹

In the context of China, unlike in other Muslim-majority countries, this goal cannot be achieved in the most direct manner like preaching. For santri in China, their approach to conveying religious ideals is manifested through their everyday actions, demonstrating the image of Indonesian Muslims and reflecting the requirements of their faith. Former Consul General for Culture and Education in Shanghai, Wandu Adriano notes that santri demonstrate their commitment to understanding the local community by adhering

⁴⁷ Yeremia, A. E. (2024). Seek Knowledge as Far as China. In *Rising China's Soft Power in Southeast Asia: Impact on Education and Popular Culture*, page 161.

⁴⁸ Examples of santri citing this Hadith in their writings are abundant. These references can be found in various articles, personal blogs, and social media posts, where santri emphasize their pursuit of knowledge in China as aligned with Islamic values.

⁴⁹ Interview with Ahmad Musyaffa on May 15th, 2024 in Jakarta.

to regulations and respecting Chinese culture, which aligns with Islamic principles. He observes that this behavior portrays Indonesian Muslims as moderate, presenting Islam not as a source of extremism, but as a faith that seeks connection rather than confrontation. In cities like Shanghai and Nanjing, Indonesian Muslim students embody this image, and local governments are accommodating to the needs of the santri community, especially during Ramadan and Eid celebrations.⁵⁰

The dissemination of religious doctrines is a crucial task for santri diplomacy, particularly for the global strategies of NU and Muhammadiyah. As the chair of PCIM China Muhammad Aziz noted, the organization is seen as playing a crucial role in reaching into the community, serving as a global messenger of Islamic teachings and Muhammadiyah principles.⁵¹

NU and Muhammadiyah employ different strategies in disseminating their respective doctrines. NU primarily utilizes dialogue to exchange ideas and media/seminars to broadcast its views. NU's alignment with the Joko Widodo administration has led to government support in promoting its international profile, exemplified by campaigns like the Religion 20 during Indonesia's G20 presidency in 2022. NU has organized numerous seminars and lectures on China, covering topics such as santri diplomacy in China, the history of the Maritime Silk Road between China and Indonesia, and Cheng Ho's expeditions to maritime Southeast Asia.

In contrast, Muhammadiyah focuses on practical cooperation in the education and health sectors, leveraging its financial resources to promote the renewal of Islam in response to modernization challenges. PCIM China, through LazisMU, conducts charity work, including disaster relief for floods in Banten, the Palu disaster, and support for COVID-19 victims. Additionally, it plays a significant role in facilitating MoUs between Chinese universities and Muhammadiyah or 'Aisyiyah higher education institutions in Indonesia.⁵²

Concerning counter-terrorism and extremism, santri are particularly vocal on the Xinjiang issue. Many in Indonesia's Muslim community, influenced by Western media narratives, believe that Uighur Muslims are systematically oppressed by the Chinese government and that their religious rights are unprotected. However, some santri who have studied in China present an alternative perspective more aligned with the Chinese government's stance, arguing that the Xinjiang issue primarily relates to counter-terrorism and extremism, and that Muslim's religious rights are protected in China. Some santri engage in seminars and write articles to promote this viewpoint, sharing personal experiences that emphasize the respect for their religious rights during their time in China.⁵³

In contrast to the typical focus of santri diplomacy on shaping Indonesian soft power in host countries, santri who have studied in China demonstrate a unique pattern that they seem to be more

⁵⁰ Interview with Wandu Adriano on May 16th, 2024, by Zoom meeting.

⁵¹ Wartaptn (2023). PCIM Tiongkok: Bentangkan Sayap Muhammadiyah di Negeri Tirai Bambu. wartaptn.id/bentangkan-sayap-muhammadiyah-di-negeri-tirai-bambu/

⁵² Wartaptn (2023). PCIM Tiongkok: Bentangkan Sayap Muhammadiyah di Negeri Tirai Bambu.

⁵³ Fadillah, D. and Jandevi, U. (2020). Media-social Behavior of Muhammadiyah Members in China in the Framework of Alexander Wendt's International Communication Constructivism. *Journal of Social Studies (JSS)*, 16(1):51–64.

concerned with disseminating knowledge about China within Indonesian society and providing narratives that differ from those presented by mainstream Western media. This constitutes a unique feature of santri diplomacy in the context of China, characterized by reverse advocacy. Rather than presenting grand narratives, these santri share everyday experiences and smaller stories in China. While such narratives may appear trivial, they hold significant value for Indonesians, particularly among the predominantly Muslim population. These accounts can effectively counterbalance the prevailing prejudices against a nation once perceived as a communist threat.⁵⁴ This is evidenced by a compilation edited by the Chinese branch of NU titled *Indonesian Santri in China* (Santri Indonesia di Tiongkok),⁵⁵ which provides an introduction to China from the perspective and daily life experience of santri. This work not only offers insights into their experiences and views but also aims to correct longstanding misunderstandings about China within Indonesian society.

d. Relations with First-Track Diplomacy

If santri diplomacy has yet to be formally incorporated into the official vocabulary of the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this situation is even more pronounced with China. The relationship between santri diplomacy and first-track diplomacy is influenced by China's political context, which seems to constrain its development into a fully-fledged diplomatic initiative. The regulations governing religious activities in China necessitate a cautious approach,⁵⁶ limiting the extent to which santri diplomacy can operate overtly within the framework of formal diplomatic relations. Consequently, Indonesian diplomatic missions in China must minimize the religious aspects of their public diplomacy, often framing santri diplomacy as part of cultural diplomacy. Wandu Adriano, observed that santri actively partake in various religious events, including the communal if-tar during Ramadan, and the joyous observance of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.⁵⁷ It is important to highlight that these events primarily cater to the Indonesian diaspora, with limited engagement from the Chinese community. Additionally, santri contribute to cultural and educational initiatives by teaching basic Mandarin to Indonesian migrant workers, an endeavor that is largely unrelated to their religious beliefs. In addition to the restrictions on religious diplomatic activities, Indonesia's diplomatic institutions generally support relevant organizations in conducting public diplomacy. The Indonesian Ambassador to China participated in events organized by the Chinese branch of Muhammadiyah and has expressed a willingness to facilitate and serve as a bridge for these initiatives.

5. Discussion

In the Chinese context, santri diplomacy exhibits unique characteristics in terms of actors, motivations,

⁵⁴ Dewi, A., Ansori, F., and Hakam, S. (2024). Keterlibatan Santri Dalam Persepsi Wacana Tiongkok. *Masyarakat Indonesia*, 49(2):227–242.

⁵⁵ Zuhri, A. S., Kurniawan, A. S., and Ramadhan, A. (2023). *Santri Indonesia di Tiongkok*. Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia.

⁵⁶ According to the 2010 Implementation Rules for the Regulations on Religious Activities of Foreigners in the People's Republic of China, foreigners are prohibited from converting individuals to their religion within China, as well as from preaching, teaching, or conducting religious gatherings in places of worship without reporting to the authority.

⁵⁷ Interview with Wandu Adriano on May 16th, 2024, by Zoom meeting.

objectives, and its relationship with track one diplomacy. This reflects the localized adaptation of santri diplomacy, highlighting the ability of Indonesian Islam to contextualize its approach. Currently, santri in China are actively engaged in public diplomacy, both individually and through organizational involvement. Their efforts demonstrate significant adaptability to China's political and social context, contributing to enhanced mutual understanding between the two societies and challenging existing prejudices. Additionally, they support the global outreach of NU and Muhammadiyah, while shaping a positive international image for Indonesia.

In the future, santri diplomacy presents considerable potential for further development. First, there exists an opportunity to expand the spectrum of participants involved. Several universities within Muhammadiyah's network have cultivated close ties with China, thereby facilitating the possibility of broadening engagement and enhancing collaborations with affiliated healthcare institutions. Similarly, certain NU boarding schools maintain strong relationships with China, and additional NU universities and boarding schools could be integrated into this network. Moreover, it is imperative to encourage the participation of other Indonesian Islamic organizations in santri diplomacy. The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should devise strategic frameworks to optimize the role of santri in public diplomacy.

Second, it is crucial to empower Indonesian santri organizations operating in China. The organizational capacities and resources of NU and Muhammadiyah branches in China are currently limited. PBNU and PP Muhammadiyah must recognize the significance of these overseas branches as vital conduits of information and network, and appreciate the contributions of santri engaged in study and work abroad toward organizational development. Providing guidance and support to these santri is essential for maximizing their potential in advancing the organizations' global expansion strategies.

Third, santri diplomacy can expand the scope of cooperation. Currently, education and culture are the primary areas of activity, largely due to the fact that most santri in China are students. In the future, cooperation can be extended to other sectors such as trade, healthcare, and scientific research by diversifying the membership base of santri organizations. Establishing and maintaining santri alumni associations can help harness the potential of those who have completed their studies in China and returned to Indonesia, allowing for continued expansion of collaborative efforts.

6. Conclusion

Although santri diplomacy has a long history in Indonesia, it was only gradually recognized by the Indonesian government after the country's democratic reforms. It has become an indispensable resource and approach for Indonesia's public diplomacy. Research on santri diplomacy is not systematic; this paper critically reviews existing studies and seeks to clarify the fundamental elements, current status, and challenges of santri diplomacy in China.

NU and Muhammadiyah are the primary organizations driving santri diplomacy in China, similar to their roles in other countries. However, in China, the influence of notable santri individuals has become increasingly prominent with the rise of social media. For NU and Muhammadiyah, the motivation for engaging in public diplomacy in China aligns with their respective globalization strategies. For some santri individuals, their involvement aims to enhance mutual understanding between the two countries, reflecting

their religious values while consciously shaping Indonesia's national image. This also serves to validate their decision to study in China, demonstrating that China is not a country that prohibits Islam, and that they remain devout Muslims upon returning to Indonesia. The primary goals of santri diplomacy in China differ from those in other countries. Due to China's regulations on religious activities, the religious objectives achievable through santri diplomacy are quite limited. Consequently, their activities are often classified as cultural diplomacy rather than faith-based diplomacy. In China, santri activities are more focused on shaping a positive image of Indonesia and fostering understanding within Chinese society. Notably, santri diplomacy often manifests as a form of reverse advocacy, where santri convey narratives and information about China to the Indonesian Muslim community, rather than the reverse. This includes correcting misconceptions within Indonesian society about the religious landscape in China, marking a distinctive aspect of santri diplomacy in the Chinese context.

In the future, it is likely that the interdependence between China and Indonesia will continue to grow. Cultural exchanges and mutual understanding are vital for solidifying the foundation of bilateral relations, and the role of santri diplomacy in connecting the two societies will become increasingly significant. It is essential to empower Indonesian Islamic organizations and influential individuals in China, expanding cooperation areas and innovating collaborative methods, so that santri diplomacy can contribute more substantially to people-to-people connectivity between the two countries.

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