

## INDONESIA'S ROLE IN THE ISSUE OF HUMAN RIGHT VIOLATIONS AGAINST THE UIGHUR ETHNIC GROUP IN XINJIANG

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### Abstract

The issue of human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group in Xinjiang, China, has drawn attention from Western countries as promoters of human rights and Muslim-majority nations, within the framework of solidarity. For Indonesia, the issue of human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group poses a dilemma. This dilemma stems from Indonesia's status as a member of the UN Human Rights Council for the 2020-2022 period and as a country with a Muslim-majority population, while China, accused of committing human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group, is a strategic economic partner. Based on this context, this paper aims to discuss the question of Indonesia's role in the issue of human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group in the years 2020-2022. The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze Indonesia's role using K.J. Holsti's theory of national roles, based on identity and interests from a constructivist perspective. The paper finds that Indonesia plays three roles in the issue of human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group: independent, example, and bridge. These roles are based on Indonesia's identity as a middle power country with economic interests and its identity as a member of the UN Human Rights Council.

**Keywords:** Foreign policy, Xinjiang, China, identity interest

### INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has been actively demonstrating its role in advocating for the protection of human rights, both domestically and internationally. Domestically, Indonesia has established the National Human Rights Commission and has ratified various primary instruments of international human rights norms (Gurinda, 2019, p. 54) (Sukendar, 2015, p. 76). These ratifications signify Indonesia's seriousness in advancing and safeguarding human rights in alignment with contemporary human rights diplomacy in international relations. Moreover, Indonesia has actively engaged in various bilateral and multilateral collaborations to promote human rights at regional and global levels. Globally, Indonesia is a founding member of the United

Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and has been elected several times as a member of the council. Indonesia served on the UNHRC during the periods of 2007-2010, 2011-2014, 2015-2017, and 2020-2022, and has recently been re-elected for the term of 2022-2025. These engagements reflect Indonesia's commitment to advancing human rights agendas on the global stage.

Indonesia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council faced a test when issues related to the human rights of the Uighur ethnic group in Xinjiang, China resurfaced. The Chinese government came under scrutiny for policies deemed discriminatory, which, in their implementation, aimed to restrict the freedom to practice religious and cultural activities by the Uighur ethnic community (Fatikasari & Fithriana, 2019, p. 178). The intensified scrutiny from Western nations towards China has been notably acute, fueled by reports from influential human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Moreover, the impact of this scrutiny has been magnified by extensive coverage in Western media outlets, which have provided detailed narratives and analyses framing the plight of the Uighur population (Kurniawan et al., 2020). This situation undoubtedly places pressure on the UN Human Rights Council to respond to the issue of human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group, with Western countries pushing for the topic to be addressed. Despite this, in voting sessions, most UN Human Rights Council members, including Indonesia, have rejected the discussion of the issue.

The stance taken by Indonesia has elicited responses from within the country, particularly from various Islamic mass organizations and the public. This stance is perceived as not reflecting Indonesia's commitment to promoting human rights and Muslim solidarity. As a democratic nation, Indonesia cannot disregard the pressure originating from public opinion in formulating foreign policy. (Debora & Sulaiman, 2019). Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, as the two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, have been actively urging the Indonesian government to take a stance on the issues facing the Uighur ethnic group. This pressure is based on the highly intensive

interaction between Indonesia and China, as well as Indonesia's position as a member of the UN Human Rights Council. Moreover, there are concerns that anti-China sentiments may resurface in Indonesia as a result of the emergence of primordial solidarity regarding the Uighur issue, especially given the various media framings of the issue (Mu`ti, 2019).

Indonesia's stance on the issue of Uighur human rights violations has become an intriguing phenomenon worthy of examination (Putri & Yumitro, 2022; Taris, 2019). This condition is related to the identity ingrained within Indonesian society, wrapped in solidarity among fellow Muslims, as demonstrated by Fiadi (2022), who conducted a comparative study on the actions of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia regarding the Uighur issue. Meanwhile, Ramadanan (2020) attempts to compare Indonesia's stance on the Rohingya and Uighur ethnic groups, both related to human rights issues and Islam. Pundilaras and Aswar (2023) and Natanael dan Henry (2019) focus on the role of the UN as an international organization in addressing the human rights issues of the Uighur ethnicity. On the other hand, Oktavia (2023) examines Indonesia's foreign policy towards China on the Uighur issue, emphasizing the aspect of Islamic law. Based on these studies, no specific research has been found that addresses Indonesia's role in the issue of human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group using the basis of identity and theories of national role in foreign policy.

Based on this background, this article seeks to answer the question of Indonesia's role in the issue of human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group from 2020 to 2022. This article aims to analyze Indonesia's role through foreign policy in responding to human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group during this period, which resulted from the conflict between its role identity in promoting human rights and its personal identity as a developing country with economic interests. The article argues that Indonesia responds to human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group through its national role, reflected in various foreign policies, which experience tension between its role identity as a member of the UN Human Rights Council and its personal identity as a developing country.

## Concept of Identity in Foreign Policy

This article attempts to analyze Indonesia's role in the form of foreign policy related to identity. Based on this premise, the article utilizes constructivism, which emphasizes Identity as a non-material aspect contributing to understanding foreign policy in interstate interactions. Constructivism holds the belief that ideas are key to understanding and shaping material aspects, particularly in international politics and relations among actors within it (Adler, 1997). Additionally, ideas serve as references to provide information about the meaning of reality within their environment (Peltonen, 2017, p. 6). This reality is manifested in perceptions that arise when ideas are confronted with those of other interacting actors' identities, both at the domestic and international levels. Thus, identity provides the basis for material aspects to serve as references for the perceptions held by actors. Perspectives cannot be separated from identity regarding other actors (Darwich, 2019, p. 12). Therefore, in line with Wendt (1992, pp. 392–397) who explains that constructivism is based on how actors' actions in their social interactions with other actors are based on their interpretations of those actors for themselves.

Foreign policy itself, in this article, is understood as both the strategy at the planning level and the actions taken by a country towards other countries or actors in order to achieve national interests (Rosenau, 1980, p. 173). Identity shapes a country's foreign policy based on preferences, interests, and behaviors (Erbas, 2022, p. 5092). Indonesia's role in the issue of human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group by the Chinese government will be seen as a pattern of interaction based on expectations derived from identity and national interests (Wendt, 1992, p. 417). As Wendt (2004) states, interests are based on the identity held by a country in its interactions with other countries or actors. In line with Clunan (2009, p. 5) roles in the form of foreign policy will be based on national interests that are not only tangible but also intangible, such as identity, norms, and other factors.

Wendt (1992, pp. 224–229) states that there are four types of identity: personal identity, type identity, role identity, and collective identity. In this research, Indonesia's behavior demonstrated through foreign policy will be based on role identity. Indonesia's role in addressing the issue of human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group is based on the identity conflict experienced. Where Indonesia's role identity as a member of the UN Human Rights Council for the period 2020-2022 is confronted with its personal identity as a developing country.

A country's national role in international relations has been described by Holsti (1970, p. 263) in 17 categories, there are: bastion of revolution, regional leader, regional protector, active independent, liberation supporter, anti-imperialist agent, defender of faith, mediator interrogator, regional-subsystem collaborator, developer, bridge, faithful ally, independent, example, internal development, isolate and protectee. The conception of national role above is formulated by policymakers driven by non-material aspects inherent in their country, such as cultural values, norms, and national identity (Dermawan & Rohmaniah, 2019, p. 472).

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Issue of Human Rights in China's Policy Toward the Uighur Ethnic Group**

The issue of the Uighur ethnic group in the Xinjiang region has been a significant aspect of China's nation-building history. During the process of forming the nation, East Turkestan, now known as Xinjiang, was forcibly incorporated into China, resulting in enduring resistance from its inhabitants. This resistance has transformed into a movement advocating for self-determination, employing a range of tactics from diplomatic avenues to acts of violence. In response, the Chinese government has sought to develop and enforce policies aimed at quelling this movement, often with a strong focus on restricting the religious and cultural freedoms of the Uighur community (Fatikasari & Fithriana, 2019, p. 178).

One particularly contentious policy is China's initiative to re-educate the younger generation of the Uighur ethnicity. This program is designed to

suppress and counteract radical ideologies among the youth, purportedly as a means to establish order and stability in the Xinjiang region (Zahrah & Widiani, 2023, p. 317). The re-education process is centralized and involves political indoctrination, Mandarin language instruction, efforts to erode cultural and religious identities, and has reportedly been accompanied by various forms of violence (Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2020, p. 3).

Another controversial policy from Beijing towards the Muslim community in Xinjiang is the restriction on religious practices and attributes. Since 2016 until now (2024), the government authorities have implemented rules prohibiting various religious activities such as congregational prayers in mosques and fasting during Ramadan. Additionally, the presence of mosques in Xinjiang is closely monitored by security authorities, making it difficult for the community to access places of worship (Saragih et al., 2019, p. 164). Furthermore, Uighur individuals are prohibited from wearing religious attributes such as prayer caps and growing beards for men, as well as wearing hijabs and face coverings for women. Moreover, in civil registration, specific names associated with extremism are not allowed for babies.

As a country still rooted in communist political practices, China seeks to impose homogeneity on its population, including in Xinjiang. One of these efforts is through monocultural policies aimed at shaping a uniform culture, language, and identity, with "monocultural" referring to the culture, language, and Han ethnic identity as the majority ethnic group in China. This policy is pursued to foster nationalism and enhance economic prosperity in the Xinjiang region.

However, in reality, it has exacerbated specific differences between the Uighur ethnic group and others (Zulkarnain & Ghonimah, 2020, p. 1220). Furthermore, the aspirations for economic prosperity within the Uighur community have remained unfulfilled, exacerbating feelings of marginalization and inequality. While the Chinese government's policies aimed to uplift the economic status of the region, the benefits have disproportionately favored the Han ethnic group. This economic disparity has

widened the socio-economic gap between the Uighur and Han communities, deepening existing tensions. The influx of Han migrants to the Xinjiang region has further exacerbated this disparity (Liu & Peters, 2017).

### **Indonesia's Foreign Policy in The Role as "Independent"**

Indonesia's foreign policy in the role of independent, as proposed by Holsti (1970) refers to how Indonesia constantly strives to determine its policies in facing or responding to emerging issues, particularly regarding the human rights of the Uighur ethnic group. Independence implies that Indonesia is not influenced or pressured by any party in determining its stance on the Uighur issue, aligning with the principle of free and active foreign policy. In this role, Indonesia demonstrates its stance by rejecting the discussion of the Uighur ethnic issue at the UN Human Rights Council and adopting a passive approach to the Uighur issue in the UN Human Rights Council.

Indonesia's stance in rejecting the discussion of the Uighur ethnic issue at the UN Human Rights Council has raised many questions, especially among the Indonesian populace. This situation cannot be separated from the expectation that Indonesia, as a country with a majority Muslim population, would take a stand and address this issue on the international stage, especially considering that Indonesia was a member of the UN Human Rights Council from 2020 to 2022. For Indonesia, the Uighur issue poses a dilemma because it involves China on one side and the United States (US) on the other. For Indonesia, the rejection of discussing the Uighur issue at the UN Human Rights Council is part of the commitment of President Joko Widodo's administration to maintain the freedom to determine the direction of foreign relations and to position Indonesia as a regional power through selective global engagement based on priorities related directly to the interests of the nation and its people (Alvian et al., 2018).

Indonesia's rejection is an effort to avoid the politicization of the UN Human Rights Council. The atmosphere surrounding the discussion of the Uighur issue reflects the rivalry between the US and China (Habib, 2022). The US and other Western countries are seeking to exert political pressure on

China through the UN Human Rights Council by advocating for the Uighur issue. Therefore, Indonesia seeks to refrain from involvement in efforts to politicize the UN Human Rights Council and to avoid confronting China, which could lead to the emergence of new tensions within the council, further prolonging the Uighur issue. As a member state, Indonesia upholds the principles and working methods of the UN Human Rights Council as outlined in UN General Assembly Resolution 60/251, wherein impartiality, transparency, and dialogue should be the guiding principles of the council's work.

Indonesia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council has raised high hopes domestically regarding efforts to assist the Uighur ethnic group, as reflected in the demands from various segments of society to the government. However, Indonesia has shown a passive stance when the Uighur issue resurfaced. This passive stance is evident in Indonesia's consistent efforts to refrain from making critical statements regarding Beijing's policies toward the Uighur ethnic group, despite Indonesia being the country with the largest Muslim population (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2019, p. 13). This consideration stems from Indonesia's perspective that the Uighur issue is a domestic matter for China as a country striving to maintain its territorial integrity against separatist actions.

Indonesia is aware of its position as a middle power in the UN system, where superpower countries, including permanent members of the Security Council such as China and the US, continue to manage hegemonic structures. For Indonesia, this position complicates its ability to determine how the system operates, leading to limitations in adapting to changes in the system (Pradityo, 2020, p. 149). Moreover, Indonesia finds itself in a disadvantageous position, as it has interests in various fields—economics, politics, and military—with both the US and China. Additionally, during the period of 2020-2022, Indonesia's bilateral relations with China were significantly closer compared to those with the US (Rosyidin, 2020, p. 244).

The two policies issued by Indonesia in response to the human rights issues concerning the Uighur ethnic group reflect the underlying identity that

shapes Indonesia's national interests. As a member of the UN Human Rights Council, Indonesia consistently strives to ensure that the organization functions without external intervention. However, as a developing country seeking to position itself amidst the rivalry among major powers in international politics, Indonesia takes a stance on the Uighur human rights issue while still considering its national interests, both towards the US and particularly towards China. For Indonesia, the existence of the UN Human Rights Council is a crucial mechanism for advocating for human rights globally, and its credibility must be maintained. However, Indonesia also needs to ensure that its credibility is not exploited for the national interests of other countries, in line with the principle of free and active foreign policy it adheres to.

### **Indonesia's Foreign Policy in The Role as "Example"**

Indonesia's foreign policy in its role as an example concerning the human rights issues regarding the Uighur ethnic group during its membership in the UN Human Rights Council illustrates a proactive stance. The role as an example, as described by Holsti (1970) emphasizes Indonesia's efforts to promote prestige and gain influence in the international system by employing specific domestic policies. Here, Indonesia's policy focuses on demonstrating its commitment to human rights to China, with the hope of setting a precedent for formulating policies regarding the Uighur ethnic group. In this context, Indonesia seeks to demonstrate through various initiatives its commitment to the ideas and implementation of international human rights norms.

Indonesia has internalized universal human rights values enshrined in the Preamble and body of the 1945 Constitution. As a normative basis, Law Number 39 of 1999 reflects Indonesia's moral and legal responsibility as a member of the UN to uphold and implement the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and various other human rights instruments accepted by Indonesia (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2019a). Indonesia's commitment to international human rights norms serves as the foundation for its initiatives in promoting human rights, demonstrating active

participation in advancing the mainstreaming of human rights enforcement at the international level (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2019b).

The close bilateral relationship between Indonesia and China provides a unique advantage for Indonesia to subtly encourage China to adhere to various international human rights norms. Indonesia serves as both an advocate and a model for how these norms can be implemented, serving as a reference for policies regarding the Uighur ethnic group. Amidst sharp international scrutiny and efforts to internationalize the issue of human rights violations against the Uighurs, the example provided by Indonesia could be adopted in China's policies towards the Uighurs to alleviate international pressure. Indonesia is not bound by the interests of the US and Western countries in pushing or coercing China to adopt these human rights values, making it easier to create trust that Indonesia is part of the solution to China's issues in Xinjiang.

Indonesia, like China, faces internal challenges regarding the internalization of human rights issues in Papua, which also involves sovereignty issues with some neighboring countries in the South Pacific. Indonesia's approach to this issue is to demonstrate its commitment to upholding and respecting human rights domestically in line with its active role internationally. This condition allows Indonesia to prove that human rights violations in Papua do not occur and can be addressed without external pressure or intervention. This experience is considered an asset for Indonesia to set an example in dealing with external pressures on human rights issues. As a member of the UN Human Rights Council, Indonesia will continue to encourage China to address the issues concerning the Uighur ethnic group in Xinjiang by sharing its own experiences. Consequently, this approach ensures that the issue is addressed without any external intervention, allowing China to resolve the Uighur issue without feeling pressured, thus facilitating a prompt resolution.

### **Indonesia's Foreign Policy in The Role as "Bridge"**

In its position as a member of the UN Human Rights Council, Indonesia faces pressure to demonstrate its commitment to addressing the issue of human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group, while also navigating its bilateral relationship with China. The Indonesian government must strive to mediate various domestic and international aspirations and pressures. In the context of the Uighur human rights issue, Indonesia seeks to play the role of a bridge, as outlined by Holsti (1970). As a bridge, Indonesia endeavors to convey concerns from other countries and Indonesian society regarding the respect for human rights of the Uighur ethnic group to the Chinese government. Additionally, Indonesia provides information about the conditions and developments related to the Uighur issue to other nations and the Indonesian public.

Indonesia fulfills this role through diplomatic efforts aimed at engaging with the Chinese government and facilitating visits by representatives of Islamic organizations from Indonesia to Xinjiang. By facilitating communication and dialogue between relevant parties, Indonesia aims to bridge the gap between different perspectives and promote understanding and cooperation in addressing the Uighur human rights issue. Through these efforts, Indonesia strives to contribute positively to finding peaceful and sustainable solutions to the challenges faced by the Uighur ethnic group.

Indonesia's diplomacy towards the Chinese government regarding the Uighur issue is part of its responsibility as a member of the UN Human Rights Council. This diplomacy advocates for the enforcement and promotion of human rights by the Chinese government in its policies towards the Uighur ethnic group without jeopardizing the close relationship that has been established with China. Indonesia must exercise caution and prioritize soft diplomacy in its approach, given China's sensitive position on its policies regarding the Uighur ethnic group, seen as integral to its sovereignty efforts (Rohman et al., 2020, p. 72). This is exemplified by the agenda in meetings between the Minister of Law and Human Rights of the Republic of Indonesia and the Chinese Ambassador, where Indonesia seeks a resolution to issues

in the Xinjiang region based on universal human rights principles but emphasizes that this does not equate to interference in China's domestic affairs (Oktavia, 2023, p. 140).

Indonesia is not only striving to communicate its human rights agenda regarding the Uighur case but also allowing room for explanation and clarification of the scrutinized issues. This step is taken due to numerous allegations, particularly from Western nations, Islamic organizations, and various domestic Islamic groups, accusing the Chinese government of concealing facts about the situation in Xinjiang. Hence, Indonesia has invited the Chinese Ambassador to Jakarta to engage in discussions and provide confirmation regarding the matters concerning the Uighur ethnic group in Xinjiang (Fiadi, 2022, p. 28). Indonesia's bilateral diplomacy with China illustrates Indonesia's position, balancing its commitment to human rights enforcement as pressured by its identity as a member of the UN Human Rights Council, with the need to maintain good relations with China. This balancing act is crucial as Indonesia, a middle power nation, holds economic interests vis-à-vis China.

In addressing the Uighur human rights issue, the Indonesian government seeks to engage various stakeholders in contributing collectively. Through intensive and trust-building approaches with the Chinese government, China eventually granted limited access to the international community, particularly Indonesia, to directly review the Xinjiang region. To avoid controversy, Indonesia sent a delegation comprising representatives from two major Islamic organizations, namely Muhammadiyah, the Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU), and the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) (Novianto, 2019). The outcomes of this visit were documented in a report submitted to the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, serving as a basis for formulating policies and stances regarding the issues affecting the Uighur ethnic group in Xinjiang.

The involvement of Islamic organizations, facilitated by the Indonesian government in addressing the Uighur human rights issue, is part of an effort to maintain a neutral stance both in the eyes of the international community

and among the Indonesian populace. Another agenda is to foster people-to-people contact between Indonesian and Uighur communities in Xinjiang. It is hoped that through these interpersonal connections, close communication can be established, allowing for direct awareness of various issues without involving the Chinese government. By opening direct communication channels, Indonesia aims to obtain firsthand information from the source to inform recommendations for actions to be taken in the UN Human Rights Council.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the argumentation stated on this paper, Indonesia's role in addressing the issue of human rights violations against the Uighur ethnic group is based on 3 out of the 17 national roles proposed by K.J. Holsti, namely as an independent, example, and bridge. These three roles are implemented through various foreign policies aimed at both the UN Human Rights Council and China, which has been highlighted due to its policies in addressing issues in the Xinjiang region where the Uighur ethnic group resides. This article sees that the emergence of these 3 national roles is based on the clash between Indonesia's role identity as a member of the UN Human Rights Council, which raises the interest to contribute to pushing and resolving human rights issues by prioritizing universal values and mechanisms within the UN Human Rights Council, and Indonesia's personal identity as a developing country that still has economic and political interests towards major countries, especially in this case, Indonesia's economic interests towards China.

Based on the national roles played by Indonesia with the role of "independent" by rejecting the discussion of the Uighur issue and being passive towards the Uighur issue at the UN Human Rights Council, role of "example" by initiating various international human rights norms, and role of "bridge" by conducting diplomacy towards the Chinese government and facilitating visits by representatives of Islamic organizations to Xinjiang. Many of these actions have not touched on substantial aspects of the issues faced by the Uighur ethnic group. Most of these actions are still based on ceremonial

aspects and conducted at the elite level. However, considering Indonesia's position and circumstances, it has fulfilled its constitutional commitments regarding human rights protection and maintained its free and active foreign policy doctrine. It has also fulfilled its duties as a member of the UN Human Rights Council regarding the Uighur issue, all without disregarding its economic interests with China. Failure to effectively address the Uighur issue could jeopardize Indonesia's economic interests due to strained relations with China, which may interpret Indonesia's involvement as interference in its domestic affairs.

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