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The CNN effect in Indonesia: re-arguing the relevance of communication theories in international relations

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1 Introduction: the CNN effect and foreign policy shifts

In 2021, the Lowy Institute concluded a rising “threat” perception of China within Indonesia (Bland et al., 2022). The survey’s sample consisted of 3,000 Indonesians aged 17 to 65, and the aim was to understand better how locals perceive the changing geopolitical landscape in which Indonesia is at the center. The developments are a surprise considering Indonesia’s rising China-related infrastructure programs, providing thousands of new employments to the millions (Fitriani, 2021; Iksan and Soong, 2022; Putra, 2022). Nevertheless, the media coverage of tensions in the North Natuna Seas between the Chinese Coast Guards (CCG), the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (BAKAMLA), and the Navy between 2016–2021 may provide clues to this empirical puzzle.

This opinion piece argues the relevance of the CNN Effect in regard to Indonesia’s rising threat perception toward China. The CNN Effect, despite not having a universal definition, aims to bridge communication theories to international relations discourse through the argument that media coverage shapes public perceptions in public spheres (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013) and ultimately pressures policymakers to make changes/impose actions (Ammon, 2001; Strobel, 1997; Mermin, 1996, 1997; Schorr, 1991). The theory gained prominence since the 1990–1991 Gulf War, with multinational media agencies emerging as actors in international relations due to their connection to state policymaking. However, scholars have started to abandon this theory due to the difficulty of constructing a direct connection between the variables of media coverage and the drive for high-level policy decision-making in international relations.

I will argue in contrast to that development by building up arguments on the relevance of the CNN effect in understanding empirical puzzles in international relations. I argue that the CNN effect is plausible in their attempt to connect the variables of media coverage, public perception (as the intervening variable), and policymaking; however, it is only to the limit of policymakers considering the public perception formed by the mass media coverage of a crisis. Bridging the foreign policy discourse of international relations acknowledges that multiple factors can lead to constructing a state’s foreign policy and does not wish to place the CNN effect exclusively as the primary cause of policy changes. However, by neglecting the relevance of the CNN effect, this opinion article piece believes we are not attaining a holistic understanding of the diverse actors that can influence state policymaking in international affairs. It takes the empirical puzzle of Indonesia’s rising

threat perception toward China between 2016 and 2021, which ultimately led to a number of policy changes within the government of Indonesia.

2 The CNN effect: reviving its relevance in international relations discourse

What exactly is the CNN Effect? As of the writing of this article, there has yet been a consensus among scholars as to the definition of the theory. However, the majority of studies made on this topic between 1990–2010 (the prime time of the theory) have assessed the nexus between real-time news coverage to the (forcible) change of policies, suggesting a level of urgency raised due to the speech of the communication (Gilboa, 2000, 2003). However, the exact “effect” in the CNN Effect is understood differently.

Past studies have attempted to conclude that media coverage drives high-level political decision-making, albeit with inconsistent results (Schorr, 1991; Shaw, 1996; Livingston and Eachus, 1995; Mermin, 1996, 1997). Several scholars have highlighted how much the compelling media images affected the US decision in humanitarian intervention operations (Feist, 2001; Bahador, 2007), while others argued the inconsistent impact of the media. To name a few of those studies, Gowing’s (1994) conclusion of the “cosmetic policy responses” of the US during the Bosnia Civil War and Livingston’s argument that media coverage only impacted less-risky political decisions (Livingston, 1997). Another dominant discourse is the analysis of the media’s role in reinforcing government positions as a result of media-state relations. Scholars have introduced the concepts of the “propaganda model,” “manufacturing of consent,” and “indexing” to explain how the media is primarily impacted by the preferences of political elites and those that finance its operations (Hallin, 1989; Bennett, 1990; Herman and Chomsky, 2010). Despite the possible connection of this opinion article’s study case to the political economy of the mass media through the “manufacturing of consent,” this connection will not be explored in this article.

The problem with existing studies is that they place less emphasis on the public perception shaped by media coverage and, ultimately, how this affects high-level political decision-making in international affairs. As Gilboa argued, the problem with the CNN Effect in the international relations discourse is the inability to establish a cause-effect relationship between media coverage, public perception, and policymaking. Another is the tendency of the existing scholarship to differentiate between pressure and control, in which “there is a difference between ‘forcing’ policymakers to adopt policy and ‘pressuring’ them to do so...the ‘forcing’ framework suggests that the media is taking over the policymaking process, while the ‘pressuring’ framework considers the media one of several factors competing to influence decision” (Gilboa, 2005, p. 38). Thus, I argue that an intervening variable in the form of public perceptions formed due to media coverage holds greater explanatory power in explaining the media’s role in constructing changes to political decisions.

The conceptual framework used for this opinion article echoes Gilboa’s thoughts. It argues that there is a correlation between

media coverage, public perception, and policymaking in the sense that policymakers then consider the results in devising a response (therefore, media is not the sole contributor to foreign policymaking decisions). The following section will discuss contemporary media coverage of China’s interventions within Indonesia’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the construction of a Chinese “threat” perception, and changes to Indonesia’s foreign policy in handling China.

3 The pressure of media coverage and public perception: the alternative “CNN effect” explanation

Since 2014, China has increased its presence in the overlapping EEZ between Indonesia and China in the North Natuna Seas. China’s provocations have been made via the use of its CCG accompanying fishing fleets to conduct Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing within Indonesian waters (Putra, 2023; BBC, 2020; Ratriani, 2020; Meyer et al., 2019). The media coverage has been dramatic. Some have shown a “POV” of the BAKAMLA and Navy officers communicating with the CCG during the crisis, with responses that have enraged the Indonesian people (Suryadinata, 2016; Supriyanto, 2015; Panda, 2016). Other coverages spotlighted the real-time crisis between the fishing fleets with BAKAMLA, providing audiences with a real-life feel of the intrusions. The development of the crisis is dynamic, with certain periods seeing the tension escalate and others de-escalate. However, the crisis continues until the present times.

Consequently, it was no surprise when the Lowy Institute issued the results of its survey, assessing how Indonesian citizens perceived great powers in the region. This decline was shown in 18 points compared to 2011 figures, and only 42% of the Indonesian people trusted China to “act responsibly” (Bland et al., 2022, p. 7). This skepticism toward China’s intentions in the region has also led 49% of the population to perceive China as a source of threat in the next decade, which increased by ten points in 10 years (Bland et al., 2022). Although the survey has been able to capture the changes in perception, in reality, this perception has been held by the Indonesian population since the emergence of the South China Sea crisis involving Indonesia in 2014, thus suggesting a connection between the media coverage of the North Natuna Seas to the China “threat” perception.

Policymakers have also adopted policies to please the public. Following tensions at sea and the highly publicized North Natuna Seas crisis, Joko Widodo, Indonesia’s current president, conducted a cabinet meeting onboard the *KRI Imam Bonjol 383* (naval fleet). As observers have stated, this was more of a turf marking and show of force in response to the growing tensions in disputed waters (JP, 2020). Other notable policy changes include outer island developments and the upgrade of fleets guarding Indonesia’s North Natuna Seas.

In connection to the CNN Effect, this study argues that there is a connection between media coverage (real-time show of the crisis in the North Natuna Sea), public perception (China “threat perception”), and changes to Indonesia’s foreign policy toward China (posture-building, outer-island development).

As discussed in past studies on the CNN Effect, news that provides fast-breaking events and high visibility of the courses of events related to a crisis allows for a higher impact on public perception (Ammon, 2001). A more substantial cause of a change of perspective among the Indonesian population is that the crisis occurred multiple times, slowly impacting how the population perceives China. Therefore, despite the vast infrastructural programs running, which have provided thousands of jobs to locals, the dominant perception would be framed by the crisis that is more engaging and “exciting” for those who view it. Furthermore, instances of Indonesian officials echoing Indonesia’s sovereignty and calling for Chinese vessels to stop encroachments have ignited a nationalist flame within the minds of the Indonesian people. As a result, there have been multiple instances in which Indonesian officials had to show themselves in media interviews to provide reassurance statements to the public that the crisis will not escalate and the news should not be blown out of proportion (Tampi, 2018). Ironically, among the media companies covering instances of China’s intrusions also include CNN Indonesia, which has been covering the Natuna crisis since 2017 (Sutari, 2017; CNN, 2020a,b). Although there are no direct connections between CNN Indonesia and this study’s CNN Effect framework, since CNN Indonesia is one of Indonesia’s most trusted media companies, its impact should not be sidelined (Reuters, 2021).

When the perception of China became dominant with a threat perception, this is when there was limited pressure provided to policymakers in Jakarta. Joko Widodo’s decision to respond to intrusions in a posture-building manner is not easy, considering the high dependence of Indonesia on China’s funding schemes to finance Indonesia’s ambitious infrastructural plans (Rijal, 2019; Caroline, 2021). Consequently, a clear line is visible between the public “threat” perception toward China and the changes of policies taken by the government in order to please the growing nationalist sentiments vis-à-vis China’s actions in disputed waters.

As Gilboa suggested, studies assessing the CNN effect must be cautious of the difference between control and pressure. This study argues that it is wrong to conclude that the North Natuna Seas media coverage has pressured the government to make radical changes. Ultimately, a more justified conclusion is that developments at sea, covered by media, have led to the construction of limited pressure on the Indonesian government to make a change in its China policy. One that would effectively respond and appease toward countering the “threat” perception that had started to grow. In contrast to existing ideas of media-state relations and media as a reinforcer of government positions, this study perceives a stronger impact of media coverage toward the construction of public perception, ultimately leading to changes in high-level political decision-making.

4 Conclusion and future research

The CNN Effect, as a theory of communication studies, has great potential to provide an alternative understanding of empirical

puzzles in international relations. This study case is essentially illustrative, suggesting the connection between media coverage, public perception, and policymaking. However, in agreement with Gilboa’s opinion, a rigid method that clearly outlines the cause-effect relationship between the three variables and considers the difference between control and pressure needs to be adopted. This abandons the past studies’ tendencies to conclude a direct link between media coverage and high-level political decision-making and argues the importance of considering an intervening variable (public perceptions).

Three inquiries could benefit future research on the CNN Effect on International Relations. First, to what extent can the CNN Effect explain instances of non-war or crisis? As most studies on the CNN Effect have discussed similar topics (with different empirical cases), none have suggested the theory’s relevance in a non-crisis or war empirical case. Second, aligned to Gilboa’s concern, what are the effects of technological changes? Specifically, the changes of media sources one has access to globally have significantly changed over time. The use of social media, which has started to become popular even among the elderly demographic, poses the question of how the CNN Effect from social media coverage may impact public perceptions and policy changes in the foreign policy dimension. Third, could the “indexing” hypothesis be relevant in this study case? This would require a deeper and fine-grained analysis of the relationship between sources and the news coverage believed to have influenced perceptions and the policy. This allows us to reveal whether coverage was following or leading official sources.

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