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EDUCATION, TALENT MOBILITY, AND THE POLITICS OF INTERDEPENDENCE: TAIWAN-INDONESIA RELATIONS THROUGH THE INTENSE PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The persistence of unofficial diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific highlights a broader shift in how states without formal recognition construct international influence. This article addresses the question of how the INTENSE Program functions as a mechanism of soft diplomacy that shapes complex interdependence between Taiwan and Indonesia, two states lacking formal diplomatic ties under the One China Policy. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study examines interview data from program participants and the Director of INTACT Base Taiwan-Indonesia in Surabaya, alongside official documents and policy publications. The findings demonstrate that the INTENSE Program operates through multiple channels involving governments, universities, industries, and intermediary institutions such as INTACT Base and TETO, reflecting the structural characteristics of complex interdependence while education displaces military force as the primary issue-area. Furthermore, the program reveals a deliberate strategy of soft diplomacy, whereby Taiwan converts demographic necessity into political capital, cultivating goodwill and regional legitimacy despite the absence of formal recognition. This indicates a shift in the function of educational cooperation: form a purely technical to labor shortages toward a calculated instrument of political interdependence. Thus, the INTENSE Program us paradoxical; it enables mutually beneficial cooperation in human capital development, while simultaneously embedding asymmetries of dependence that favor Taiwan's strategic interests over Indonesia's structural position within the relationship.

Keywords: complex interdependence; soft diplomacy; INTENSE program; Taiwan-Indonesia relations, unofficial diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

Taiwan is a global hub of technology and manufacturing, particularly in the semiconductor and *Information and Communication Technology* (ICT) sectors. The presence of major corporations such as Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), MediaTek, and United Microelectronics Corporation (UMC) positions Taiwan as a world-class industrial power that continues to drive demand for skilled labor in STEM fields (Lee, 2025). The growth of this high-tech industry requires human resources that are not only technically proficient but also adaptable to the dynamics of research and market needs. To support this demand, Taiwan has actively developed a competitive higher education system and promoted its internationalization through academic mobility and cross-border cooperation. Data from the Ministry of Education shows that the number of international students in Taiwan exceeded 123,000 in the 2024-2025 period, with a target of 320,000 by 2030, indicating that higher education has become a long-term strategic instrument for Taiwan (Ministry of Education Republic of China (Taiwan), 2026), (ICEF Monitor, 2025).

However, behind its industrial and higher education advancement, Taiwan faces a serious demographic challenge. Taiwan has now officially entered the category of a *super-aged society*, with 20.6% of its population aged 65 and above, while the productive-age population continues to decline (Secretary for Household Affairs, 2026). The Taiwan National Development Council projects that, without significant policy intervention, Taiwan will experience a labor shortage of approximately 400,000 to 480,000 workers by 2030 (News, 2023). This shortage not only affects the economic and industrial sectors but also threatens the sustainability of the higher education ecosystem, which depends on academics, researchers, and skilled labor. Consequently, openness to cross-border participation has become an unavoidable strategic choice for Taiwan.

Indonesia, on the other hand, is experiencing the opposite demographic condition-a surplus of productive-age population. The combination of Taiwan's need for skilled labor and the availability of productive human resources in Indonesia creates a strong basis of complementarity for cross-sectoral cooperation. However, this structural complementarity cannot be channeled through formal diplomatic pathways, as Taiwan and Indonesia have no official diplomatic relations as a consequence of the *One-China* policy adopted by Indonesia. This condition raises a fundamental question: how can two

states that are structurally dependent on one another build effective cooperation in the absence of a formal diplomatic framework as its foundation?

In response to this issue, the Taiwanese government, through the Ministry of Education, has designed various cross-border education policies, one of which is the *International Industrial Talents Education Special* (INTENSE) Program. This program integrates academic learning with industrial experience through structured pathways, scholarships, and industry-based curricula (Ministry of Education, 2025). The implementation of the INTENSE Program in Indonesia, supported by intermediary institutions such as INTACT Base Taiwan-Indonesia and the Taipei Economic and Trade Office (TETO), reflects the involvement of both state and non-state actors in cross-border educational cooperation. This interaction forms a layered and sustained network of relations, which, from an international relations perspective, can be understood as a form of *complex interdependence* - a condition in which interstate relations are built through various non-security channels and involve reciprocal dependence (Rana, 2015).

Nevertheless, understanding the INTENSE Program solely as a manifestation of structural interdependence is insufficient to explain why and how this relationship has been strategically constructed by Taiwan amid its limited formal diplomatic recognition. A sharper reading of the political dimension of this cooperation is required namely, how industry-based higher education is employed as an instrument of *soft diplomacy* to build influence, legitimacy, and strategic access without going through formal channels of sovereign recognition. Based on this background, this study aims to examine how the implementation of the INTENSE Program reflects the integration of structural interdependence and soft diplomacy strategy in shaping a complex and sustained Taiwan Indonesia relationship.

METHOD

This research utilizes a descriptive qualitative method, with interview and documentation as the data collection techniques. The researchers act as the key instrument in data collection, drawing on interviews with informants directly involved in the INTENSE Program as well as documents such as official reports, institutional websites, and policy publications. Subsequently, the authors analyze the collected data to

obtain understanding through interpretation, guided by the concepts of complex interdependence and soft diplomacy. The level of analysis used in this research is the nation-state, focusing on Taiwan and Indonesia within the context of cross-border higher education cooperation. Therefore, the unit of analysis in this study is the implementation of the INTENSE Program.

The informants in this research were selected using a purposive sampling technique, in which informants are chosen based on their relevance, knowledge, and direct involvement in the INTENSE Program. Primary data were obtained through interviews with the Director of INTACT Base Taiwan-Indonesia in Surabaya and four program participants, as shown in Table 1. Secondary data were collected from official documents, including the INTACT website, Taiwan's Ministry of Education publications, and relevant academic literature, to support and contextualize the analysis.

No.	Nickname	University	Program Period	Study Program	Course Type
1.	Zamroni	CYUT	Fall Program 2025	Civil Engineering	Post-Bacc
2.	Arjun	CYUT	Spring Program 2025	Civil Engineering	Post-Bacc
3.	Zikry	CYUT	Spring Program 2025	Civil Engineering	Post-Bacc
4.	Reddy	NTU of Business	Fall Program 2025	AI and Business Application	Master’s Degree

Table 1. Recipients Interview

(Source: Author's own processed data)

Complex interdependence is used to read the structural pattern of the relationship formed through the INTENSE Program, particularly in terms of the involvement of multiple actors, the absence of a hierarchy of issues, and the reduced role of military force. Meanwhile, soft diplomacy is used to read the strategic dimension of the program, particularly in terms of how education is deliberately employed by Taiwan to build influence and legitimacy in the absence of formal diplomatic recognition with Indonesia.

RESULT

Complex Interdependency between Taiwan and Indonesia under INTENSE Program

The implementation of the INTENSE program reveals a pattern of complex interdependence in the relationship between Taiwan and Indonesia, particularly through the integration of industry-academia through the cooperation between governments, universities, institution, and industries.

Multiple Channels

Relationship between Taiwan and Indonesia in the implementation of the INTENSE Program does not occur solely through government channels, but also involves various cross-sectoral actors, reflecting the concept of multiple channels as described by Keohane and Nye. In this context, the actors involved are not limited to the governments of Taiwan and Indonesia, but also include universities, industry, intermediary institutions such as INTACT Base and TETO, as well as students as program beneficiaries. This multi-actor involvement is not merely symbolic, but functional and interconnected within an integrated system. This is reinforced by the golden triangle concept presented by Mr. Andre So (2026), which emphasizes the close relationship between the government, universities, and industry as the main pillars of the program's success. Within this framework, the government plays a role in providing policies and program schemes, universities carry out academic and educational functions, while industry plays a role in providing training and absorbing the workforce.

The results of interviews with recipients also confirmed the existence of interdependent relationships among the actors. They stated (2026) that;

> "They (universities, government, industry, participants) each have their own roles and complement one another… they are interdependent on one another. The program could not be run without any policy by the government and without any participants also the company such as Earth Power sending their people to teach us in the class, INTACT provide the information and preparation, TETO help us as the visa part and so on." (Result of interview with P 1&2)

This multi-actor interaction is also reflected in the experience of program participants. Reddy identified several actors involved in the implementation of the program, including;

> "Taiwanese universities that develop plans with corporate partners and fully implement the programs; industry partners that provide training opportunities for students to enter the workforce; INTACT offices (BIU Office) in the students' home countries; and home universities, TETO, and its affiliated departments that support the administrative process." (Result of interview with P-4)

This statement indicates that the program's success is highly dependent on the coordination and contributions of all involved actors. Thus, the relationships formed are not linear or hierarchical, but rather a complex network of cooperation involving various channels of interaction across institutions and individuals.

Absence of Hierarchy of Issues

The research findings also indicate that the relationship between Taiwan and Indonesia through the INTENSE Program is not dominated by security or military issues, but rather focuses on education and human resource development. This reflects an absence of a hierarchy of issues, in which education has become the top priority in bilateral cooperation between the two countries. In this context, education is no longer positioned as a secondary issue but has become a strategic instrument to address the structural needs of each country. Taiwan, which faces demographic challenges such as an aging society and low birth rates, utilizes this program to attract skilled foreign workers. On the other hand, Indonesia leverages this program as a means to enhance the quality of its human resources through access to education and international work experience. As participants explicitly described the program as a mutually beneficial relationship. Mr. Arjun stated that:

> "This program is a win-win for both sides… Taiwan needs human resources and Indonesia has plenty of human resources." (Results of interview with P-2)

This statement indicates that education and labor issues are at the core of bilateral relations, supplanting the dominance of traditional issues such as security. In a broader context, this shift toward non-traditional issues as the primary focus on international cooperation is also reflected in other cases beyond the INTENSE Program. Mubah and

Anabarja highlight that Taiwan, through its successful management of the COVID-19 pandemic, was able to transform a domestic health issue into a strategic instrument of international engagement through mask diplomacy (Mubah & Anabarja, 2020). This indicates that issues such as public health, education, and labor are no longer positioned as secondary concerns, but rather as central elements in shaping international relations. Similar to the INTENSE Program, where education and workforce development become the core of Taiwan-Indonesia cooperation, Taiwan's mask diplomacy demonstrates how non-military issues can function as key drivers of international interaction and influence, even in the absence of formal diplomatic recognition.

Reduced Role of Military Force

In line with the absence of a hierarchical structure of issues, the research findings indicate that the role of military power in relations between Taiwan and Indonesia through the INTENSE Program is insignificant. The interactions established are entirely based on civilian cooperation, particularly in the fields of education, industry, and workforce development. This reflects the characteristic of a reduced role of military force, wherein the use of military power does not serve as an instrument in the bilateral relations that have been established. Within the framework of the INTENSE Program's implementation, relations between the two countries emphasize long-term, mutually beneficial collaboration. The golden triangle concept linking government, universities, and industry demonstrates that this cooperation operates through institutional and professional mechanisms, rather than through a power-based approach. Interactions among actors focus on knowledge exchange, skill enhancement, and workforce integration within the industrial sector.

Furthermore, the fact that program participants are required to work after completing their studies also indicates that the relationship formed is structural and institutionalized, rather than coercive. Mr. Zamroni stated that they were:

> "…bound by a contract signed upon acceptance with the sponsoring company." (Results of interview with P-1)

indicating that the commitment involved is professional and agreement-based, not the result of political or military pressure. Thus, the relationship between Taiwan and Indonesia in this context reflects a form of modern interdependence built through complex and sustained civil cooperation.

DISCUSSION

Interdependence as Structure: Interpreting the Findings

The finding regarding multi-actor involvement (government, universities, industry, INTACT Base, and TETO) confirms that the Taiwan-Indonesia relationship does not operate hierarchically or linearly, but rather as a cross-institutional network of cooperation-precisely as described by the concept of multiple channels (Keohane & Nye, 1997). The golden triangle concept presented by Andre So is not merely an organizational description; it indicates that the program's sustainability depends on an interlocking distribution of roles among actors no single actor, including the state, can run the program alone.

Likewise, the dominance of education over security issues confirms the absence of hierarchy of issues: the structural needs of Taiwan (demographic crisis) and Indonesia (surplus of productive-age population) position education as the primary arena of interaction between the two countries, displacing the pattern of interstate relations traditionally dominated by security concerns. This shift from security toward non-traditional issues has also been found in other cases of Taiwan's foreign relations; Mubah and Anabarja, (2020) show how Taiwan converted its successful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic into an instrument of international engagement through mask diplomacy. This parallel confirms that non-military issues, including education, can function as key drivers of Taiwan's international interaction, even in the absence of formal diplomatic recognition.

Finally, the post-study contractual obligation confirms the reduced role of military force: the relationship formed is institutional and agreement-based, rather than coercive.

Soft Diplomacy as a Strategic Mechanism

Joseph Nye, (2004) defines soft power as an actor's ability to influence others to achieve desired outcomes through attraction, rather than through coercion or payment. Soft diplomacy, or public diplomacy, is the concrete instrument used to convert such soft power resources into tangible influence in international relations. Based on this framework, the finding regarding the expansion of the INTENSE Program to four Southeast Asian countries can be read not merely as a technical response to Taiwan's

labor shortage, but as an instrument deliberately designed to build Taiwan's influence and legitimacy in the region, amid its limited formal diplomatic recognition. The program is not designed as a limited bilateral initiative, but as a regional platform that systematically expands Taiwan's network of influence through unofficial channel.

Within this framework, the finding regarding the role of INTACT Base and TETO can be understood as a form of *para diplomacy* - a term developed by Duchacek, (1984) to describe the involvement of non-central actors in international relations. TETO itself formally functions as a de facto embassy of Taiwan in Indonesia, carrying out the non-diplomatic functions of a diplomatic mission, such as promoting economic interests and providing consular assistance, despite not holding official diplomatic status (Taipei Economic and Trade Office Jakarta Indonesia, 2024). The existence of TETO and INTACT Base enables Taiwan to maintain a substantive interstate relationship despite the absence of an embassy in Indonesia positioning industry-based higher education as a soft power resource converted into political capital, building goodwill through concrete benefits such as full scholarships, industry-based training, and post-study employment guarantees.

However, the findings also show that Indonesia is not merely a passive recipient of this strategy. The Indonesian government and educational institutions have also strategically leveraged the program to accelerate human resource development without bearing its full cost, while simultaneously opening access to the international labor market for its citizens. This relationship is therefore reciprocal, although as discussed in the following subsection not entirely symmetrical.

Politics of Interdependence: Asymmetry and Bargaining Power

Keohane & Nye, (1997, p. 8) assert that interdependence is not always symmetrical (“reciprocal, although not necessarily symmetrical, costly effects of transactions”), and that the less dependent party in a relationship tends to hold greater bargaining power. This imbalance in the degree of dependence is itself a source of power within an interdependent relationship.

The finding regarding the program's design - which requires participants to work in Taiwan after graduation, with the duration of employment adjusted to the length of

the scholarship - indicates that Taiwan occupies a structurally more advantageous position. This scheme ensures that the educational investment provided by Taiwan is directly returned in the form of a work-ready labor force for Taiwan's industry a design that, at its core, serves Taiwan's strategic interests first, before its benefits are felt by Indonesia.

Conversely, the finding regarding the program's limitations - an unstable curriculum, language barriers, and limited dissemination of information indicates that Indonesia does not yet fully control the design and direction of this program. Indonesia's dependence on a framework unilaterally designed by Taiwan - from curriculum and scholarship schemes to post-study work obligations suggests that although this cooperation is mutual, the distribution of benefits and strategic control remains tilted toward Taiwan.

Thus, the INTENSE Program cannot be understood neutrally as an equal partnership. The program reflects a form of asymmetrical interdependence, in which Taiwan's power and strategic interests remain the dominant factor shaping the direction and structure of the relationship, even as it is conducted through the language of educational cooperation that appears mutually beneficial. The soft diplomacy exercised by Taiwan through INTENSE therefore does not eliminate the dimension of power in international relations - it merely transforms its form, from coercive power into power based on attraction and structural dependence.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the INTENSE Program functions simultaneously as a structural manifestation of complex interdependence and a deliberate instrument of soft diplomacy in the relationship between Taiwan and Indonesia. Firstly, multiple channels, reflected in the involvement of governments, universities, industries, and intermediary institutions such as INTACT Base and TETO, which operate not merely as symbolic actors but as functionally interconnected pillars within the program's golden triangle structure. Secondly, absence of hierarchy of issues, whereby education and human resource development have displaced security as the primary concern of bilateral cooperation, positioning Taiwan's demographic needs and Indonesia's human capital

surplus as the central drivers of the relationship. Thirdly, reduced role of military force, evident in the entirely civilian and contractual nature of the program, wherein participants are bound to sponsoring companies through post-study work agreements rather than any form of coercive arrangement. As a result, the INTENSE Program has successfully generated structural interdependence between the two states while simultaneously enabling Taiwan to convert demographic necessity into political capital, cultivating goodwill and regional legitimacy despite the absence of formal diplomatic recognition.

When formal diplomatic channels are foreclosed by the One-China Policy, states turn to unofficial, education-based instruments to construct influence and legitimacy that ultimately reproduces itself as political capital. This case exemplifies the evolution of contemporary diplomacy, showing that higher education can serve as an alternative channel of statecraft and legitimacy-building in the global political arena. It also underscores the persistence of power asymmetry even within seemingly cooperative arrangements, where states with greater structural need retain the upper hand in bargaining power despite the language of mutual benefit.

The Taiwan-Indonesia case offers valuable insights into how states without formal diplomatic relations can transform structural complementarity into a sustained instrument of political influence. The findings reveal that institutional design, strategic framing, and cross-sectoral networking enable states to exert influence even in the absence of sovereign recognition. For scholars and policymakers, this case highlights the importance of integrating power analysis into the study of educational cooperation, rather than treating it merely as a technical or humanitarian undertaking. For Indonesian policymakers and higher education institutions in particular, it underscores the need for greater involvement in program design and governance to ensure that the benefits of such cooperation are more equitably distributed. Ultimately, the INTENSE Program symbolizes not only a pragmatic response to demographic imbalance but also the broader transformation of higher education into a strategic instrument of interdependence and influence amid the complexities of contemporary unofficial diplomacy.

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