

## **BEYOND CENTRALISM: THE EVOLUTION AND CHALLENGES OF PARADIPLMACY IN THE UNITARY STATES – A CASE STUDY OF INDONESIA**

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### **Abstract**

Paradiplomacy has emerged as a critical mechanism for subnational governments to engage internationally in response to globalization and decentralization. While extensively studied in federal systems, its dynamics within unitary states remain underexplored. This study examines the evolution and institutionalization of paradiplomacy in Indonesia through qualitative case studies of West Java Province and the City of Surabaya. Drawing on Kuznetsov's multidimensional framework, complemented by theories of multilevel



governance, actorness, and soft power, the analysis highlights how subnational actors navigate legal ambiguities, institutional constraints, and political centralization to assert agency in global governance. Findings reveal that leadership vision, institutional innovation, strategic networking, and adaptive governance strategies, rather than formal legal authority, drive successful paradiplomacy in Indonesia. Despite notable achievements, systemic challenges—such as fragmented coordination, legal uncertainty, and capacity limitations—constrain the full potential of subnational international engagement. This study expands paradiplomacy theory beyond federal contexts, emphasizing the importance of informal mechanisms, networked strategies, and alignment with national development agendas to enable subnational actors within centralized political systems.

### Keywords

Paradiplomacy, subnational governance, multilevel governance, actorness, decentralized diplomacy.

### Resumo

A paradiplomacia surgiu como um mecanismo crítico para os governos subnacionais se envolverem internacionalmente em resposta à globalização e à descentralização. Embora amplamente estudada em sistemas federais, sua dinâmica dentro de Estados unitários permanece pouco explorada. Este estudo examina a evolução e a institucionalização da paradiplomacia na Indonésia por meio de estudos de caso qualitativos da província de Java Ocidental e da cidade de Surabaya. Com base na estrutura multidimensional de Kuznetsov, complementada por teorias de governança multinível, atuação e soft power, a análise destaca como os atores subnacionais lidam com ambiguidades jurídicas, restrições institucionais e centralização política para afirmar sua agência na governança global. As conclusões revelam que a visão de liderança, a inovação institucional, o networking estratégico e as estratégias de governança adaptativa, em vez da autoridade jurídica formal, impulsionam o sucesso da paradiplomacia na Indonésia. Apesar das conquistas notáveis, desafios sistêmicos — como coordenação fragmentada, incerteza jurídica e limitações de capacidade — restringem o potencial total do envolvimento internacional subnacional. Este estudo expande a teoria da paradiplomacia além dos contextos federais, enfatizando a importância de mecanismos informais, estratégias em rede e alinhamento com as agendas de desenvolvimento nacional para capacitar atores subnacionais dentro de sistemas políticos centralizados.

### Palavras-chave

Paradiplomacia, governança subnacional, governança multinível, atuação, diplomacia descentralizada.

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### **Introduction**

Paradiplomacy—the international engagement of subnational governments—has become an increasingly significant element of contemporary global governance. While the phenomenon is well-documented in federal states, its manifestations within unitary systems have remained underexplored. In Indonesia, the post-New Order decentralization reforms of 1999 granted provinces and municipalities substantial autonomy, enabling them to engage in cross-border cooperation in sectors such as investment, education, climate change, and culture. However, these emerging practices encounter persistent challenges, notably legal ambiguities, institutional fragmentation, and coordination hurdles with central authorities, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As global challenges intensify, necessitating local innovation and international collaboration, the role of subnational actors has become increasingly critical.

This study examines paradiplomacy's evolution and institutional dynamics in Indonesia, focusing on two illustrative cases: West Java Province and the City of Surabaya. It further evaluates how legal and institutional frameworks facilitate or constrain subnational international engagements, providing insights relevant to other unitary states experiencing decentralization.

Paradiplomacy encompasses the participation of subnational entities—including regions, provinces, and municipalities—in international relations, often operating alongside or



independently of national governments (Ciesielska-Klikowska & Kamiński, 2022; Fantoni & Avellaneda, 2022; Smith, 2019). This practice has evolved alongside the intensification of globalization, the deepening of decentralization, and the growing recognition of local governments' distinct capacities to address economic, political, and cultural challenges more effectively than centralized authorities. Initially informal and sporadic, paradiplomacy has developed into a structured and multidimensional domain, bolstered by technological advancements and increasing demands for local autonomy during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Comparative studies highlight the diversity and institutionalization of paradiplomacy across the globe (Ciesielska-Klikowska & Kamiński, 2022; Smith, 2019). In Europe and Latin America, subnational governments have leveraged their geographic, cultural, and economic attributes to build international partnerships and assert their interests on the global stage. Even within unitary systems such as China, innovative strategies have enabled subnational actors to achieve global visibility despite strict central oversight (Liu & Yao, 2019, 2020). These developments reflect a broader shift from hierarchical diplomacy models toward more pluralistic and multilayered forms of international engagement.

A critical dimension in paradiplomacy research is the distinction between federal and unitary systems. Constitutional arrangements in federal states like Canada and the United States formally empower subnational governments to conduct international relations (Lequesne & Paquin, 2017). In contrast, subnational actors in unitary states must often navigate more stringent central controls, relying on informal or ad hoc mechanisms that typically require national approval (Liu & Yao, 2019, 2020). Case studies such as those of Aceh (Indonesia) and Catalonia (Spain) demonstrate how the degree of subnational autonomy and institutional support varies significantly depending on the political and legal contexts.

The evolution of paradiplomacy reflects broader transformations in global governance, wherein local autonomy is increasingly recognized as crucial to practical international cooperation. While federal systems often offer more supportive environments for subnational diplomacy, unitary systems produce more fragmented and experimental practices due to centralized constraints. Understanding this dichotomy underscores the importance of legal and institutional contexts in shaping the capacities and influence of subnational actors (Ciesielska-Klikowska & Kamiński, 2022; Fantoni & Avellaneda, 2022; Lequesne & Paquin, 2017; Liu & Yao, 2019, 2020; Smith, 2019).

Indonesia's decentralization has generated profound legal and institutional consequences for subnational engagement in international affairs. The post-Reformasi autonomy laws devolved fiscal, administrative, and political authority to regional entities, allowing them to initiate international collaborations aligned with regional socio-economic priorities (Diprose, 2022; Susiatiningsih et al., 2018). These reforms encouraged a bottom-up approach to foreign cooperation.

Nonetheless, decentralization also introduced challenges regarding policy coherence and legal clarity. Studies have noted persistent tensions between local autonomy and central oversight (Butt, 2019; Susiatiningsih et al., 2018). Inconsistencies in regulatory authority



and conflicting mandates reveal the pressing need for enhanced intergovernmental coordination to harmonize subnational diplomacy with national foreign policy (Butt, 2019).

Moreover, decentralization fostered legal pluralism, enabling local administrations to create region-specific legal and diplomatic mechanisms that enhanced their international engagement capacities (Butt, 2019; Susiatiningsih et al., 2018). Indonesian local governments have since actively pursued sister-city partnerships, bilateral cooperation initiatives, and participation in transnational policy forums, asserting themselves as contributors to international governance.

Paradiplomacy has proven vital for addressing global challenges such as climate change and sustainable economic development. Subnational actors have complemented national policies by tailoring responses to local conditions and leveraging specialized knowledge. Municipal networks have facilitated the sharing of best practices and joint climate adaptation initiatives (Smith, 2019). Participation in transnational forums has further enabled subnational actors to address institutional gaps left by national mechanisms (Mauad & Betsill, 2019).

Subnational diplomacy also significantly advances economic development through trade promotion, foreign investment attraction, and sustainable innovation (Bouchet, 2022; Smith, 2019), particularly as climate resilience and economic competitiveness increasingly intertwine (Setzer, 2015; Setzer et al., 2020).

Despite its growing relevance, scholarly exploration of paradiplomacy in Southeast Asia remains limited. Much existing research lacks comprehensive comparative analysis and remains narrowly focused, particularly regarding unitary states like Indonesia (Dermawan et al., 2022). This gap highlights the need for a deeper inquiry into how subnational actors in centralized political systems engage internationally.

Paradiplomacy has provided subnational governments with critical mechanisms to respond to globalization through localized, adaptive strategies. However, its theoretical development remains insufficient, especially in Southeast Asia and Indonesia. This study seeks to address this gap by examining Indonesia's legal, institutional, and strategic paradiplomacy dimensions, offering broader insights for other unitary states navigating global governance challenges. Despite existing studies on paradiplomacy, there remains limited understanding of how subnational actors in unitary states navigate centralized governance constraints, particularly in Southeast Asia. This study addresses this gap by examining Indonesia's subnational diplomacy through two prominent cases.

## Literature Review

The scholarly exploration of paradiplomacy initially concentrated on federal states, where constitutional frameworks grant regional and local governments substantial autonomy to engage in external relations. Foundational contributions by scholars such as Kuznetsov, Lecours, and Cornago developed key theoretical models emphasizing the significance of institutional factors, legal permissibility, and political incentives as critical drivers of subnational international engagement. Kuznetsov's multidimensional framework, in particular, highlighted the crucial role of internal organizational structures and domestic



political will in shaping paradiplomatic outcomes (Fantoni & Avellaneda, 2022; Jackson, 2017). His model stressed the importance of institutional capacity, including foreign affairs departments, chambers of commerce, and international liaison offices, in facilitating effective global engagement.

Building upon this foundation, later scholarship incorporated a variety of theoretical perspectives, such as institutionalism, network theory, political geography, and, to a lesser extent, realist approaches. Institutionalists argue that decentralization fosters the formal capacity of subnational governments to participate internationally by delegating administrative authority and creating specialized bureaucracies. Network theorists complement this view by emphasizing the empowerment of subnational actors through transnational coalitions and partnerships, allowing them to bypass traditional national diplomatic channels and gain access to knowledge, resources, and political leverage. Political geography adds another dimension, examining how territorial location and regional identity shape paradiplomatic strategies (Fantoni & Avellaneda, 2022; Jackson, 2017).

Despite broadening theoretical perspectives, Kuznetsov's framework remains influential due to its adaptability across different governance contexts. It identifies two primary conditions for successful paradiplomacy: establishing pro-international institutional infrastructures and securing sustained political support from local elites. Empirical applications of Kuznetsov's model consistently demonstrate that subnational entities equipped with dedicated foreign affairs units, stable funding, and political leadership are better positioned to engage internationally. Scholars have further enriched Kuznetsov's model by integrating factors such as globalization pressures, regional identity politics, and normative concerns within international relations (Fantoni & Avellaneda, 2022; Jackson, 2017).

Paradiplomatic activity typically operates along three core dimensions: institutional, legal, and motivational. Institutionally, decentralized governance structures provide subnational governments the autonomy to establish mechanisms supporting international outreach, such as foreign cooperation offices and participation in global city networks. For instance, Indonesian provinces have established international cooperation units, and cities like Surabaya actively participate in transnational climate initiatives (Susiatiningsih et al., 2018). These institutional structures align international engagement with local development goals and foster greater policy responsiveness. Moreover, effective political leadership has proven essential for legitimizing and sustaining support for such initiatives.

From a legal perspective, paradiplomacy remains framed within constitutional provisions that typically reserve foreign policy authority for national governments, particularly in unitary states. Despite formal restrictions, subnational actors often employ pragmatic strategies to navigate legal constraints, exploiting ambiguities or utilizing informal channels. In Indonesia, decentralization laws offer administrative discretion for international cooperation, yet persistent questions regarding authority and policy coherence complicate local initiatives (Butt, 2019; Susiatiningsih et al., 2018). This legal duality underscores the complex interplay between formal limitations and adaptive practices in subnational diplomacy.



Motivationally, paradiplomacy is driven by diverse objectives, including economic development, cultural promotion, identity articulation, and political positioning. Local governments frequently seek international partnerships to attract foreign investment, expand market access, and elevate global profiles. Other motivations include the promotion of regional identities and participation in international norm-setting, particularly in areas such as climate action, education, and public health. Successful paradiplomatic initiatives are often grounded in visionary leadership, elite consensus, and broad community support for internationalization (Cantir, 2019; Susiatiningsih et al., 2018).

Despite its conceptual richness, paradiplomacy scholarship faces several critiques. Its predominantly case-specific and descriptive nature is a primary limitation, which restricts broader theoretical generalization across political and legal systems. Furthermore, research has been disproportionately centered on Western federal systems, resulting in significant gaps in the understanding of paradiplomatic practices in non-Western and unitary contexts. This imbalance has contributed to conceptual blind spots, particularly regarding informal and experimental paradiplomatic activities within centralized political systems. Additionally, persistent conceptual ambiguity surrounding the term "paradiplomacy"—which is inconsistently applied across different levels of governance—continues to undermine its analytical precision (Cantir, 2019; Jackson, 2017).

The literature offers a multidimensional but fragmented understanding of subnational international engagement. Although diverse theoretical frameworks have illuminated its institutional, legal, and motivational aspects, substantial gaps remain, particularly in the operationalization of paradiplomacy in non-Western and unitary states. Kuznetsov's model remains a valuable analytical tool, especially when adapted to centralized systems' specific political and legal contexts. Building on these conceptual foundations, this study examines the evolution of paradiplomacy in Indonesia—focusing on the cases of West Java and Surabaya—to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of subnational diplomacy within unitary states.

While Kuznetsov's multidimensional framework and its subsequent adaptations offer valuable insights into the institutional, legal, and motivational dimensions of paradiplomacy, the majority of existing models have been developed within federal contexts. As this study will demonstrate, the specific challenges and adaptive strategies of subnational actors in unitary states such as Indonesia necessitate a critical reassessment and expansion of these theoretical frameworks.

## Method

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to investigate the evolution of paradiplomacy within the framework of a unitary state, focusing on Indonesia as the primary context. Following the post-Reformasi decentralization reforms, provincial and municipal governments in Indonesia gained increased autonomy, enabling them to participate in international cooperation initiatives. To capture the diversity of responses to these institutional changes, two contrasting cases were purposively selected: West Java Province and the City of Surabaya. These cases represent distinct levels of subnational governance and diverge in their international strategies—West Java



emphasizes economic and investment diplomacy, while Surabaya leads in sustainable urban development and global city networking.

The case study approach was chosen for its effectiveness in producing in-depth, contextual analyses and facilitating comparative insights between diverse institutional environments. Rather than seeking broad generalizations, this method prioritizes rich empirical understanding of complex phenomena—specifically, how local actors navigate legal, political, and bureaucratic constraints to engage internationally.

Data collection focused on qualitative document analysis. Primary sources included decentralization laws, local regulations on international cooperation, Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), and strategic development plans from both West Java and Surabaya. Supplementary sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and credible media publications were also reviewed to strengthen the analysis and support triangulation.

The analytical framework is grounded in Kuznetsov's multidimensional model of paradiplomacy, encompassing four key dimensions: legal foundations, institutional capacity, strategic motivation, and external outcomes. This model guided the thematic coding process, which was used to identify recurring patterns and infer the underlying logics shaping each locality's approach to international engagement.

The coding scheme was developed inductively and refined through iterative review, consistent with the methodological guidance of Sinambela (Sinambela et al., 2024). Particular attention was given to formalized international initiatives—such as bilateral agreements and project-based collaborations—to assess their alignment with national policy frameworks and legal mandates.

Performance indicators were also identified, including the creation of foreign affairs units, frequency of participation in international forums, and demonstrable results from global partnerships. These indicators were analyzed with reference to governance benchmarks from Zeemering to assess strategic capacity and institutional maturity (Zeemering, 2017).

Overall, the integration of case study design and thematic document analysis provides a rigorous yet flexible framework for exploring subnational diplomacy in centralized political systems. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of how regional and municipal governments in Indonesia assert international agency within the confines of a unitary state architecture.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **The Growth of Paradiplomacy in Indonesia**

Since the early 2000s decentralization reforms, Indonesia has significantly transformed its subnational governance, especially in the capacity of local governments to engage internationally. Regional autonomy, formalized through Law No. 22/1999 and refined in Law No. 23/2014, transferred substantial administrative, political, and fiscal authority to subnational entities. Although the Constitution reserves foreign affairs for the central government, globalization pressures—including the imperatives of attracting investment,



fostering educational exchanges, and enhancing environmental governance—have incentivized local governments to seek international collaborations.

Government Regulation No. 28/2018 on Regional Cooperation introduced procedural frameworks permitting subnational governments to establish international partnerships, subject to approval from central ministries. However, in practice, the implementation of paradiplomatic initiatives has been uneven. While some regions have effectively leveraged the regulatory space to develop sustained international partnerships, others have limited their activities to symbolic engagements. These variations reflect disparities in institutional capacity, leadership vision, and resource availability across different localities.

Significantly, paradiplomatic success in Indonesia has been driven by legal reforms, leadership foresight, institutional innovation, and strategic networking. As Fantoni and Avellaneda (2022) argue, the mere existence of legal frameworks is insufficient; active political commitment and the ability to mobilize networks are crucial to success (Fantoni & Avellaneda, 2022).

Indonesia's decentralization has enabled subnational governments to articulate region-specific development priorities within international forums. Cases such as Semarang City's urban sustainability initiatives (Susiatiningsih et al., 2018), Karawang District's agricultural innovation through sister-city programs, and Aceh's cultural diplomacy leveraging special autonomy (Dermawan et al., 2022) exemplify how localized strategies can enhance global engagement.

Nevertheless, paradiplomacy practices remain highly asymmetrical across Indonesia. Variations in financial resources, bureaucratic competency, and political commitment have created uneven patterns of international engagement. While provinces like West Java and cities like Surabaya have institutionalized paradiplomacy, many other local governments struggle with basic capacity constraints.

### **Case Study 1: West Java Province**

West Java has emerged as a leading actor in Indonesia's paradiplomatic landscape, demonstrating how strategic vision and institutional innovation can amplify subnational global engagement. Under the "Jabar Juara" framework, the provincial government developed an integrated international cooperation agenda encompassing investment promotion, education, environmental sustainability, and cultural diplomacy.

One of West Java's most notable innovations has been the establishment of the West Java Investment Promotion Center (WJIPC) in Singapore, a strategic hub for foreign direct investment. Mirroring global best practices such as São Paulo's InvestSP, the WJIPC actively promotes the province's competitive advantages—a skilled workforce, modern infrastructure, and strategic geographic position (Dermawan, Azmi, et al., 2024).

At the institutional level, West Java has embedded international cooperation within its administrative structures by creating specialized units and supporting regulations. Local initiatives, such as agricultural collaborations in Karawang and environmental programs



in Cirebon, further demonstrate a clear alignment between global engagement strategies and regional development goals (Affandi & Utami, 2024; Khoerunnisa & Maulana, 2023).

Additionally, West Java’s strategic deployment of soft power tools—through educational exchanges, cultural festivals, and targeted digital campaigns—has effectively enhanced its international brand (Dermawan, Alam, et al., 2024). These initiatives showcase how paradiplomacy can operate not only through formal agreements but also by cultivating reputational capital.

Overall, West Java's success highlights leadership, institutional readiness, and network mobilization—rather than formal diplomatic authority—as the principal enablers of effective subnational diplomacy within unitary systems. The figure below summarizes the key components of West Java’s paradiplomatic strategies, illustrating how institutional mechanisms, leadership, and soft power are integrated to support international engagement.

**Figure 1.** West Java’s Strategies

Characteristic	Investment Promotion	Institutional Infrastructure	Cultural Diplomacy & Education	Strategic Branding
Focus	Attracting foreign investment	Embedding paradiplomacy in administration	Strengthening international linkages	Cultivating a global image
Mechanism	West Java Investment Promotion Center (WJIPC)	International cooperation units, sister city partnerships	Student mobility, language programs, festivals	International expos, digital campaigns, summits
Goal	Enhancing global visibility and appeal	Leveraging cooperation for economic benefit	Strengthening international linkages	Shaping international perceptions

Source: Authorship

### Case Study 2: Surabaya City

Surabaya has established itself as a pioneer in municipal-level paradiplomacy, characterized by pragmatic, issue-specific international engagements. The city’s paradiplomatic efforts center on operational partnerships rather than symbolic affiliations, with sister-city collaborations with Kitakyushu (Japan), Liverpool (United Kingdom), and Busan (South Korea) yielding tangible outcomes in areas such as waste management, public health, and urban innovation (Sinambela et al., 2024; Wardhani & Dugis, 2020).



The Green Sister City Program with Kitakyushu exemplifies how informal yet strategic partnerships can deliver substantial environmental outcomes, including improved waste management systems and enhanced sustainability practices (Dzazira & Pratama, 2023; Utomo, 2022).

Institutionally, Surabaya embedded international cooperation within the mayor’s office, ensuring strategic alignment with municipal development priorities (Amiri, 2022). Beyond bilateral relationships, Surabaya’s active participation in multilateral networks such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group and ICLEI demonstrates how global urban coalitions provide critical platforms for municipal paradiplomacy (Ciesielska-Klikowska & Kamiński, 2022).

Surabaya’s experience reveals that informal mechanisms—such as city-to-city exchanges, network memberships, and joint initiatives—are essential for sustaining subnational international engagement under centralized political constraints. Figure 2 presents Surabaya’s operational model of paradiplomacy, emphasizing its focus on pragmatic partnerships, issue-specific collaborations, and multilateral urban networks.

**Figure 2.** Surabaya’s Paradiplomacy Strategies

Characteristic	Sister City Partnerships	Multilateral City Networks	City Branding Strategy
Focus	Outcome-oriented collaborations	Peer learning and policy dialogues	Projecting a coherent city identity
Examples	Kitakyushu, Liverpool, Busan	C40, ICLEI	Global trade fairs, summits
Benefits	Access to expertise and innovation	Technical and institutional knowledge	Enhanced international recognition
Implementation	Memoranda of understanding	Participation and engagement	Digital diplomacy and media campaigns

Source: Authorship



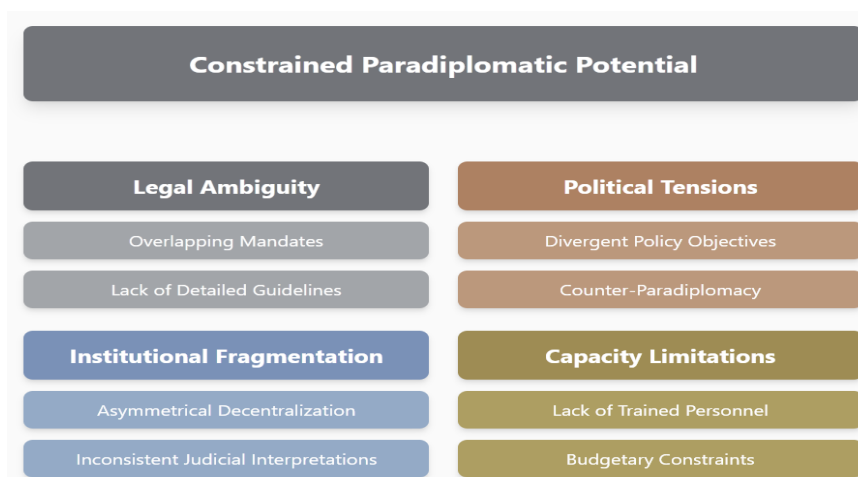
## Challenges in Subnational Foreign Engagement

Despite notable advancements, paradiplomacy in Indonesia faces persistent and multifaceted challenges:

- **Legal Ambiguity:** While decentralization laws permit international cooperation, the lack of detailed procedural frameworks has led to cautious, fragmented practices and inhibited innovation.
- **Institutional Fragmentation:** Uneven devolution of administrative authority creates coordination problems, while limited communication between subnational governments and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hampers policy coherence (Asmorojati et al., 2022).
- **Political Tensions:** Divergent priorities between national and local actors often produce friction. Central interventions sometimes constrain subnational initiatives perceived as deviating from national diplomatic agendas (Bouchet, 2022).
- **Capacity Constraints:** Many local administrations lack trained personnel, sustainable funding, and institutional memory, limiting their ability to initiate and maintain robust international partnerships (Dermawan, Alam, et al., 2024).
- **Ambivalent Central Government Stance:** Subnational diplomacy's simultaneous encouragement and restriction create an unpredictable operational environment (Sharma et al., 2020; Smith, 2019), forcing local actors to rely on ad hoc, negotiated arrangements rather than systematic cooperation.

These challenges reaffirm the need for greater clarity in regulatory frameworks, stronger intergovernmental coordination, and sustained investment in subnational institutional capacities. The challenges discussed above are synthesized in the following figure, which maps the structural and operational barriers faced by Indonesian subnational governments in conducting foreign engagement.

**Figure 3.** Challenges in Subnational Foreign Engagement in Indonesia



Source: Authorship



## Linking Empirical Findings to Theoretical Contributions

The Indonesian experience provides empirical validation for the argument that paradiplomacy theories must be expanded beyond federal contexts. The success of subnational actors such as West Java and Surabaya illustrates that adaptive strategies, informal governance mechanisms, and strategic alignment with national priorities are critical enablers of paradiplomatic agency in unitary states.

Additionally, the findings confirm the significance of informal pathways, multilevel negotiation, and soft power utilization as indispensable elements of paradiplomatic practice under centralized governance structures.

Thus, Indonesia's evolving subnational international engagement demonstrates that even without constitutional authority, subnational governments can act as credible international players—provided they possess leadership vision, institutional adaptability, and strategic network-building capacities.

## Theoretical Reflection

Understanding paradiplomacy within unitary states like Indonesia necessitates a broader analytical lens beyond the legalistic frameworks commonly developed for federal systems. While legal authority remains significant, successful paradiplomacy in centralized contexts hinges more on adaptive governance mechanisms, informal strategies, and the dynamic agency of subnational actors operating within centralized constraints.

Although Kuznetsov's multidimensional model remains foundational, it requires critical adaptation to accommodate the specific challenges and opportunities present in unitary systems. Federal models, which presuppose formal constitutional authority for subnational diplomacy, often fail to account for the improvisational and negotiated practices that characterize paradiplomacy in unitary contexts. Existing theoretical frameworks must therefore be contextualized, incorporating the unique political, legal, and institutional realities of decentralized but non-sovereign actors.

While Kuznetsov's multidimensional model provides a valuable analytical foundation, its application to unitary states demands critical refinement based on empirical realities. Experiences from other centralized systems show that subnational international engagement often operates through informal, negotiated mechanisms rather than through formalized institutional pathways. In China, for example, Liu and Yao (2019, 2020) reveal how Yunnan Province successfully expanded its international presence via pragmatic regional initiatives and transborder collaborations without explicit constitutional authority (Liu & Yao, 2019, 2020). These findings highlight the importance of opportunistic and adaptive strategies over rigid institutional infrastructures in centralized settings. Similarly, Sharma et al. (2020) demonstrate that Indian states, despite operating within a quasi-federal but highly centralized framework, leverage partisan linkages, personalized leadership, and policy entrepreneurship to sustain international engagements (Sharma et al., 2020). These cases collectively suggest that subnational actorship under centralized governance structures depends not merely on institutional endowments, but also on political agility, elite networking, and strategic



alignment with national priorities. Accordingly, theoretical models must recognize the informal, dynamic, and context-sensitive nature of paradiplomatic practices in unitary states, beyond the structural assumptions derived from federal contexts.

Integrating multilevel governance, actorness, and soft power theories complements Kuznetsov's framework and provides a more comprehensive understanding of subnational international engagement.

Multilevel governance theory emphasizes the diffusion of authority across multiple tiers. It suggests that subnational actors can assert themselves internationally not by directly challenging central authority but by operating within policy spaces that align local capacities with global agendas (Christie, 2022). In Indonesia, the overlapping spheres of influence among regional, national, and international actors have enabled cities like Surabaya and provinces like West Java to participate meaningfully in global governance processes without infringing on national sovereignty.

The concept of actorness further enriches this analysis by highlighting how subnational governments can cultivate legitimacy, external recognition, and agenda-setting capacity despite lacking sovereign status (Liu & Yao, 2020). Case studies, such as Yunnan Province in China and Surabaya's leadership in global environmental networks, illustrate that strategic specialization, institutional credibility, and international networking enable subnational entities to acquire tangible influence within global governance arenas.

Soft power dynamics also play an increasingly critical role in paradiplomacy. Subnational governments, such as West Java and Surabaya, utilize cultural diplomacy, education exchanges, and city branding to project favorable regional identities, attract investment, and build reputational capital internationally (Dermawan, Alam, et al., 2024; Jiménez-Castillo et al., 2022). This strategic deployment of soft power has allowed subnational actors to enhance their international and domestic legitimacy.

An important distinction must be made between paradiplomacy and proto-diplomacy. While proto-diplomacy often carries secessionist or politically sensitive connotations, Indonesian paradiplomacy remains development-oriented and aligned with the national interest. Subnational engagements prioritize functional objectives such as trade promotion, environmental sustainability, and educational collaboration without challenging the state's territorial integrity or foreign policy prerogatives. This functionalist orientation distinguishes Indonesian paradiplomacy as a collaborative complement to national diplomacy rather than a competitive alternative.

Moreover, legal pluralism and informal strategies emerge as critical mechanisms enabling paradiplomacy within centralized political frameworks. The absence of detailed legal procedures compels subnational actors to navigate constraints through pragmatic and often creative strategies, exploiting legal ambiguities and building informal networks to sustain international partnerships. This flexibility underscores the innovative capacity of subnational governments operating within restrictive institutional environments.

Building upon these insights, this study advocates for developing a revised analytical framework for understanding paradiplomacy in centralized systems. Beyond institutional capacity and political endorsement, successful paradiplomacy in unitary contexts depends on the following factors:



- The degree of legal discretion available to subnational actors,
- The efficacy of informal and networked approaches,
- The strategic alignment between local initiatives and national development agendas,
- The leadership capacity to mobilize credibility and sustain international engagements.

Comparative perspectives further illuminate the structural asymmetries between federal and unitary systems. In federal states, constitutional autonomy offers a relatively secure foundation for subnational diplomacy (Lequesne & Paquin, 2017). In contrast, unitary systems demand more flexible, opportunistic, and context-sensitive strategies due to the absence of formal mandates. Nevertheless, as West Java and Surabaya have demonstrated, subnational actors can exercise considerable agency and contribute substantially to global governance networks even within centralized constraints.

In conclusion, integrating Kuznetsov’s model with multilevel governance, actorness, and soft power perspectives offers a more holistic and context-sensitive understanding of paradiplomacy in unitary states. It highlights the dynamic interplay between institutional innovation, strategic adaptation, and political negotiation that defines subnational international engagement in contemporary global governance. Building upon this synthesis, this study proposes a recalibrated model of subnational diplomacy for unitary systems—characterized by informal strategic agency, leadership-driven negotiation, and opportunistic alignment with national agendas. Before concluding, it is important to acknowledge several limitations of this study that may influence the interpretation and generalizability of its findings. Figure 4 conceptualizes the core enablers of paradiplomacy in unitary states, integrating legal discretion, informal strategies, strategic alignment, and leadership capacity into a unified analytical model.

**Figure 4.** Paradiplomacy in Unitary States: Key Concept

Characteristic	Kuznetsov’s Model	Actorness	Multilevel Governance	Soft Power & Branding
Focus	Institutional infrastructure and endorsement	Recognition as coherent international actor	Authority dispersion across government tiers	Projecting positive regional image
Key Elements	Legal discretion, informal networks, adaptive strategies	Legitimacy, external recognition, attractiveness, agenda-setting	Subnational participation aligned with global priorities	Cultural diplomacy, attracting foreign investment
System	Suited for centralized political systems	Valuable insight into subnational entities	Enriches understanding of paradiplomacy	Strategic function of paradiplomacy

Source: Authorship



## Study Limitations

While this study offers significant insights into paradiplomacy practices within a unitary state context, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the qualitative case study design, although effective for capturing in-depth dynamics, inherently restricts the generalizability of findings. The focus on West Java and Surabaya provides valuable illustrative examples but may not fully represent the diverse experiences of other subnational entities in Indonesia or other unitary states undergoing decentralization. Future studies incorporating broader cross-regional comparisons could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the variation in paradiplomatic practices.

Second, the reliance on document analysis and secondary data sources may have limited the ability to capture real-time political dynamics, informal negotiations, or evolving intergovernmental relationships that significantly influence subnational diplomacy. Conducting interviews with policymakers, local officials, and international partners could enrich the analysis by providing firsthand perspectives and uncovering latent factors influencing paradiplomacy strategies. Addressing these limitations in future research would contribute to a deeper and more nuanced theorization of subnational international engagement in centralized governance systems.

## Conclusion

Paradiplomacy in Indonesia has evolved as a pragmatic and adaptive response to the dual imperatives of globalization and decentralization. Despite operating within a centralized political framework, subnational governments have progressively asserted international agency by mobilizing local assets, forging strategic partnerships, and institutionalizing foreign cooperation mechanisms.

The case studies of West Java Province and the City of Surabaya demonstrate that effective paradiplomacy in a unitary state depends not primarily on formal constitutional authority but on leadership vision, institutional innovation, strategic networking, and the adaptive exploitation of legal and political spaces. Through proactive strategies—including establishing foreign cooperation units, participating in global city networks, and deploying soft power tools—these subnational actors have successfully inserted themselves into global governance processes.

Empirically, this study reveals that while decentralization laws provided an initial legal foundation for subnational international engagement, the realization of paradiplomatic potential is highly contingent upon local initiative, institutional capacity, and strategic alignment with national development agendas. However, the practice of paradiplomacy across Indonesia remains uneven and fragmented, constrained by persistent challenges such as legal ambiguities, institutional fragmentation, political contestations, capacity deficits, and the ambivalent stance of the central government.

Theoretically, the Indonesian experience underscores the need to expand paradigms of paradiplomacy beyond federal-centric models. Concepts such as multilevel governance, actorness, soft power dynamics, and informal negotiation strategies must be integrated to capture the complexities of subnational engagement within centralized systems accurately. Successful paradiplomacy in unitary states is not merely a function of legal



permission but a product of adaptive governance, relational strategies, and strategic navigation of institutional constraints.

To strengthen the development of paradiplomacy in Indonesia and other unitary states, a series of strategic reforms must be prioritized. First, it is crucial to clarify the legal mandates that govern subnational international activities. Clearer procedural guidelines would reduce uncertainty, provide legitimacy, and create space for innovation in local-level diplomacy. Second, robust intergovernmental coordination mechanisms should be established or enhanced to ensure that subnational initiatives are coherently aligned with national foreign policy objectives. This would help prevent overlap, miscommunication, or policy contradictions between levels of government.

Third, long-term investment in institutional development and human resource capacity is essential. Local governments must be equipped with the technical expertise, organizational infrastructure, and trained personnel needed to engage meaningfully and sustainably on the international stage. Fourth, stronger strategic alignment must be fostered between local development priorities and the broader goals of global governance. Doing so would enable subnational actors to contribute more effectively to shared international agendas while advancing local interests.

Finally, the strategic use of informal mechanisms and networked approaches should be encouraged. In contexts where formal authority remains limited, leveraging informal relationships, transnational city networks, and issue-based coalitions can provide viable pathways for subnational actors to assert influence and sustain global partnerships within centralized political environments.

Beyond its national relevance, this study contributes to the broader academic discourse by demonstrating that subnational engagement in international affairs is viable and impactful even within highly centralized political environments. It challenges the notion that subnational diplomacy is the exclusive domain of federal systems, showing instead that dynamic agency, institutional bricolage, and strategic adaptability are equally critical enablers. This study extends Kuznetsov's model by incorporating informal negotiation strategies and multilevel governance dynamics specific to unitary state systems.

Future research should explore comparative paradiplomacy across regions and political systems, evaluate the long-term policy outcomes of subnational international initiatives, and investigate emerging modalities such as digital paradiplomacy and global city diplomacy. Such efforts are vital for reconceptualizing diplomacy in an increasingly decentralized and interconnected world, where subnational actors are poised to play greater roles in addressing global challenges.

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