

The China Gambit

— In Focus: Indonesia,
Philippines, Thailand, Fiji



ADN
ASIA DEMOCRACY NETWORK

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Indonesia: Love, Hate, Surrender, Capture 1

Philippines: Throw Money, Seize the Seas 83

Thailand: Nations as Siblings, Family? 159

Fiji: Debt Diplomacy to the Max 195

Way Forward: Opportunities and Challenges 223



INTRODUCTION

A GAMBIT, under any circumstance, is a problematic move. Between nations, players locked in a gambit would have to know what exactly, and what separately, they are giving and getting.

A gambit could be a strategem, or “a calculated move to deceive and outwit the enemy,” as in wartime. It could also be “a cleverly contrived trick or scheme for gaining an end,” as in peacetime.

In war or in peace, a gambit is a ploy to open doors, deploy a plan, or simply, achieve desired results.

By all accounts, the gambit now playing between the People’s Republic of China and the governments of Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Fiji, has become a cost-benefit equation.

Nearly all the benefit goes to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China’s state-owned enterprises and business entities, and their political allies and partner corporates in the four countries.

In contrast, nearly all the cost is borne by the people, the economy, democratic institutions, and the rights and welfare of workers and citizens, in the same four countries.

To claim and assert its role as a global superpower, China plays this gambit. And where it does, the most tragic cost has been a palpable decline in the scope and state of democracy, human rights, and transparency and accountability of its national government allies.

This is the story of ***The China Gambit*** in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Fiji that the Asia Democracy Network (ADN) wants to tell.

It is a seminal account of the various modes of hard power and soft power interventions by China in the four countries.

It aims to connect the dots across political, economic, trade, security, foreign affairs, education, culture, and political party connections that bind China and the four countries in the last decade, and specifically from 2016 to 2022.

It builds on data and information from state and non-state sources, and draws out the thoughts and voices of on-ground stakeholders, including civil servants, state regulators, policy analysts, academics, business leaders, journalists, civil-society advocates, workers, citizens, and the Chinese diaspora in the four countries.

It aspires to draw a map of the affected and engaged parties and groups inquiring into China's interventions that have eroded and corroded democracy and democratic institutions across nations of the world.

But by its own account, China, with the Communist Party of China at its helm, posits itself as a working and functioning democracy, albeit a unique one, according to a [White Paper](#) released a few days before the U.S.-sponsored "2021 Summit on Democracy."

China avers that "there is no fixed model of democracy" and that "it manifests itself in many forms." Its version of democracy, or what is described in the White Paper as a "whole-process people's democracy," specifically downplays the importance of elections, and instead places weight on [surveys and public-opinion submissions](#) as a form of public participation in governance. By China's definition, a state that adopts such a policy is a democracy nonetheless.

In recent decades, to tell and promote "the China story," China has unleashed its economic and diplomatic heft, launched its multi-trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); challenged norms in institutions of global governance like the United Nations; and created parallel or alternative financial institutions, on the global stage.

On parallel track, China has tossed tons of aid, loans, grants, project funds for any and all imaginable purposes and sectors; unveiled aggressive exchange programs and content-sharing agreements with academe, media, and Chinese diaspora entities; poured funds and supplies for "vaccine diplomacy" during the COVID-19 pandemic; and pushed trade, training, and contracts with Chinese corporates in security, defense, telco, and information and communication technology – in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Fiji – where democracy remains fragile, state agencies weak and compromised, and economies in dire need of funds to expand and grow.

In these four "battleground" spaces, there are governance structures not yet fully developed, in a state of stagnation, and plagued by vested domestic interests. Paired with China's aggressive influence-peddling, the results are invariably so corrosive to democracy, accentuated by [corruption](#), [patronage](#), [repression of freedoms](#), among others.

These national actors who are so wrapped in the China gambit face a delicate balancing act: on one hand, grappling with the risks posed by China's assertive behavior and apathetic attitude toward human-rights concerns; on the other hand, alluring economic benefits and the protection and "friendship" of a global superpower.

For these actors, the gambit with China has become an intractable bundle of special considerations, trade-offs, personal and political give-and-take, but also benefits.

Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Fiji are among Asia-Pacific's most dynamic economies, and hold significant geopolitical sway in the region.

Indonesia and Thailand (with Malaysia and Singapore) control the Malacca Strait where up to [two-thirds of China's maritime trade volume and around 60 percent of its entire oil supply pass through](#).

The Philippines controls parts of the South China Sea where around [US\\$1.5 trillion worth of Chinese trade happens](#), as well as several chokepoints such as the Bashi Channel, which serves as an access to the Pacific.

Fiji serves as a [regional diplomatic hub](#) in the Pacific, which the Chinese government has eyed constantly amid the decision of several Pacific Island nations to recognize Taiwan.

The Belt and Road Initiative or BRI, together with loans, development aid, and other economic and diplomatic measures, have become China's tools to incentivize, coerce, and co-opt actors in these countries.

Estimated to have [US\\$1 trillion to US\\$8 trillion worth of investments](#), BRI alone is seen by many countries as an attractive source of developmental resources. The governments of the four countries have been eager to access BRI resources to augment and complement their own domestic development plans – Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) in Indonesia launched in 2014; Build, Build, Build (BBB) in the Philippines launched in 2017; Thailand 4.0 launched in 2016 and its centerpiece Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) program; and Transforming Fiji 5-Year and 20-Year National Development Plan (NDP) launched in 2017.

The leaders of these four countries were more than willing to accept China's helping hand despite concerns of [debt-trap diplomacy](#) surrounding the BRI. Unlike its Western counterparts, China does not require partner governments to adopt human rights and transparency conditionalities, among other principles, as a requisite for its deals.

It is important to note that at the time when these developmental plans were launched, the governments of the same four countries were facing heavy scrutiny of their democratic records.

Indonesia's Joko Widodo was turning more anti-secular and nationalistic; the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte was on a murder spree with his "War on Drugs"; Thailand's Prayuth Chan-o-Cha was filing strategic litigation against public participation cases (SLAPPs) against critics years after the 2014 military coup that he led; and Fiji's Frank Bainimarama was comfortably continuing his authoritarian ways following the 2006 military takeover that had him at the helm.

Given these concerning developments, the United States and other Western nations stepped back on aid and trade, and started to keep a distance from these regimes. This default by the West – intended or not, real or imagined – has allowed China an opportunity to fill in the gap.

Years of illiberal rule in the case of Fiji and Thailand, or the stagnation of democracy in Indonesia and the Philippines, left regulatory agencies compromised, inefficient, and failing. Their institutional weaknesses allowed Beijing to conduct "[united front work](#)," court and capture political and economic elites, and launch an aggressive people-to-people and party-to-party charm offensive.

This report documents how Beijing worked to build connections with local communities: through content-sharing agreements with state and private media that allowed the publication and broadcast of "the China story"; exchange programs and university-partnership deals for students and teachers; circulation of opinion pieces and 'Twitplomacy' takes by "wolf-warrior diplomats" in newspapers and social media; joint cultural events and training seminars for academics, civil servants, and security personnel; and grants to set up Confucius Institutes and friendship societies that are now mushrooming in the four countries.

To be sure, China's actors get what they want, and their domestic partners get what they need. Little or no transparency marks the conduct of these deals, however. And when China-funded projects run into delay, controversy, corruption, or altogether fail, not much outcry has been heard from national agencies and the controlled or captured media in China and the four countries.

Worse, the adverse impact of China projects on the environment, the harassment and violation of workers' rights, and bad business practices by China corporates have fallen on deaf ears.

China's tight grip on freedom of expression within its borders has extended beyond these as well. It has issued a stern command that partner-states should embrace the "One-China Policy" and keep silent or censor reports about Beijing's actions in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet – unless they want to lose China's favor and tons of aid.

This is ***The China Gambit***.

It documents what happens when the vested interests of China and domestic parties align and produce results that scar and undermine democracies.

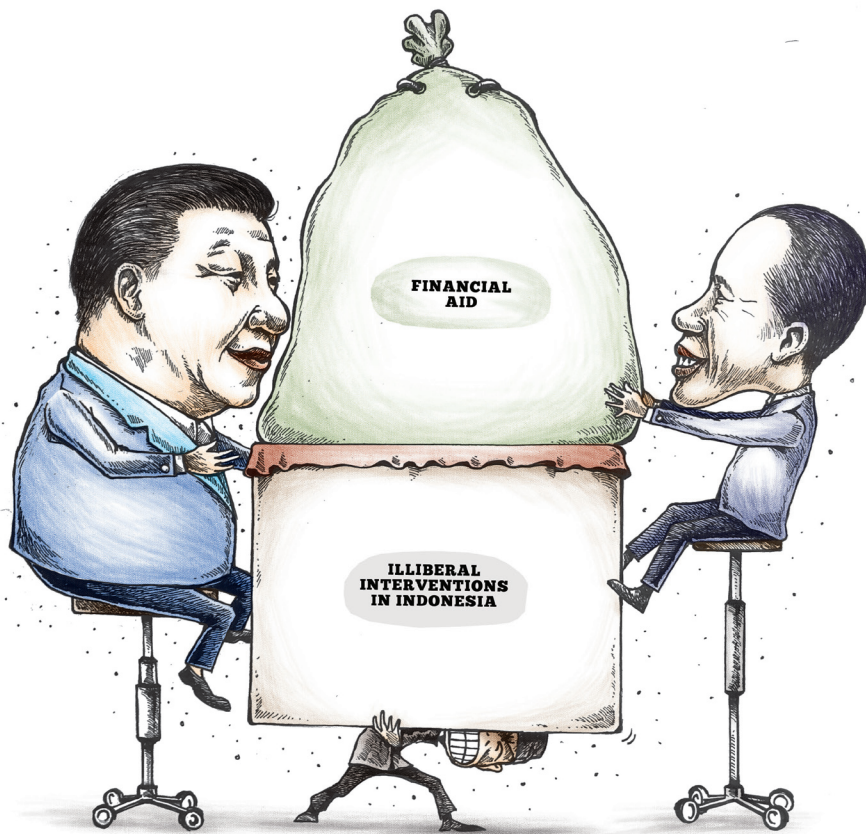
It explores the challenges confronting various sectors, communities, and civic spaces.

It commends more accountability advocacy work, reforms, and institutional mechanisms that can help level the unequal playing field between China and the citizens of the four countries who are the most adversely affected by the deals and decisions made by their leaders.

It calls on democracy actors in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Fiji to hold China and its national co-players in this gambit accountable for playing bad.

China and Indonesia

Love, hate, surrender, capture





Fast Facts : INDONESIA

Official Name : **Republic of Indonesia**
(Republik Indonesia)

Capital : **Jakarta**

Geography : **34 provinces**

Total area : **1,904,569 sq km**

Land area : **1,811,569 sq km**

Water area : **93,000 sq km**

Population : **277,329,163 (2022)**

Head of state : **President Joko Widodo**
(since October 2014)

National language : **Bahasa Indonesia**

Currency : **Rupiah (IDR)**

GDP : **\$1,119,720,000,000 (2019)**

GDP per capita : **\$11,900 (2021)**

Source: The World Fact Book

Introduction

INDONESIA is a democracy on progressive decline, by the policy and practice of a parade of political leaders since its birth in 1945 as a supposedly “unitary parliamentary constitutional republic.”

The world’s largest archipelago of about 18,110 islands and islets (of which only 6,000 are inhabited), Indonesia is also the world’s largest Muslim-majority country. In a 2018 government census, eight in 10 Indonesians or 86.7 percent identified themselves as Muslims, or an estimated 231 million of the nation’s 268 million total population (2019 data). This means that Indonesia accounts for about 13 percent of the 1.97 billion adherents of Islam across the world, according to a 2022 PEW Research Center study.

Freedom, human rights, and the people’s economic well-being and welfare have often played second fiddle in the altar of Indonesia’s state philosophy of *Pancasila*. Authored by the nation’s founding leader Soekarno in 1945 at the preparatory committee for Indonesia’s independence, *Pancasila* stands for the Five Principles of “Indonesian nationalism, internationalism or humanism, consent or democracy, social prosperity, and belief in one God.”

In the last half-century, however, Pancasila has rendered Indonesia vulnerable to illiberal actors, notably the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which has vigorously sought to fashion and impose its own notions of democracy outside its borders. Ambivalence toward PRC marked the first two decades of bilateral relations; China was one of the first countries that supported Indonesia’s independence, but was also seen as a national security threat on account of its alleged support for the Indonesian Communist Party. Under the Soeharto dictatorship, the ethnic Chinese community suffered under discriminatory laws. Soeharto’s downfall after 35 years in power ushered in a tide of *reformasi* and restored relations with Indonesians of Chinese ethnicity – but not before an anti-ethnic Chinese pogrom in May 1998 left more than 1,000 people dead.

In October 2014, Joko Widodo came to power as Indonesia’s first “civilian” president, or at least one not grafted from the country’s political or military elite. He gained a second term in 2019 and rules to this day. A businessman and member of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan; PDI-P), Jokowi -- his popular appellation -- had served previously as governor of Jakarta and two-term mayor of Surakarta

City (also known as Solo). Before politics beckoned, the forestry engineering graduate had worked with a state-owned pulp mill in Aceh. By 2002, Jokowi “had become a highly successful furniture exporter, with showrooms on several continents, as well as chairman of a local branch of the country’s influential furniture manufacturers’ association,” according to his [Britannica](#) profile.

President Jokowi declared commitment to populist measures to improve public services, implement land reform, build more affordable housing, and fight corruption, alongside a vigorous drive to attract foreign investments, particularly from the Chinese government.

Under his watch, China’s Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) and bilateral agreements with Indonesia have triggered profound negative economic and fiscal impacts rather than the claimed positive results. Investment ventures backed by the Chinese government have been accorded National Strategic Project status, despite adverse results on the socio-economic conditions of their host communities, environmental damage, and restraints on the rights of workers and press freedom.

China continues to fatten its superbly generous portfolio of project loans, official development aid, grants, and technical assistance for Indonesia. According to AidData, a research and innovation lab at the College of William & Mary in the United States, Indonesia from 2009 to 2019 had received a total of 264 various loans, grants, “buyers’ credit,” and technical assistance that were worth innumerable billions of dollars from the Chinese central government, state agencies, and state-owned companies and conglomerates, along with the Export-Import Bank of China, Bank of China, and China Development Bank.

The amount, said AidData, covered projects, programs, and activities in all imaginable economic, political, social, and security sectors – industry, mining, construction, energy, education, health, transport and storage, agriculture, forestry, fishing, emergency response, “reconstruction, relief and rehabilitation,” “environmental protection,” “government and civil society,” “general budget support,” information and communication technology, and the military.

By 2020, China has become Indonesia’s largest trading partner – the top market for its exports, and the top source of its imports.

According to the [World Integrated Trade Solution](#) database of the World Bank, China accounts for 19.48 percent of Indonesia’s imports (about US\$31.79 billion), far ahead of the United States’ 11.44 percent (US\$18.65 billion) share, and single-digit values for Japan, Singapore, and India.

China is also the main market for Indonesia’s exports – 28 percent (US\$39.64 billion), followed by much smaller values from Singapore, Japan, the United States, and Malaysia.

On parallel track, to refine its narrative and image, the Chinese government has launched a massive socio-cultural roadshow of media and educational partnerships, content-sharing programs between Chinese and Indonesian media agencies, people-to-people exchange programs, “twitplomacy” on social-media platforms by embassy officials, and generous support for “Confucius Center Institutes” that have sprung up across Indonesia.

Indonesia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that from 2015 to 2022, the country had 71 official exchanges, including treaties, memorandums of understanding, agreements, and other formal correspondences involving many of its state institutions with the government of China.

Multiple high-level dialogues and meetings have also occurred between Jokowi and Chinese President Xi Jinping, as between other senior officials of both countries in Beijing, Jakarta, and elsewhere. Apart from Jokowi’s party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), eight other major to minor political parties in the Indonesian parliament have sealed as well “institutional cooperation through MoU, conducted visits and meetings, and exchanged notes with “intention to establish cooperation” with the Communist Party of China.

The Jokowi administration, state agencies, and the economic elite of Indonesia continue to enjoy strong economic and geopolitical leverage, with a lot of help from Beijing. This, at the expense of the rights and freedoms of Indonesia’s citizens, and absent firm government commitment for civil-society organizations and communities critical of China’s illiberal interventions in the Southeast Asian nation.

INDONESIA’S MARCH TO ILLIBERALISM

On 20 October 2014, Joko Widodo came to power after defeating Prabowo Subianto, an ex-military general and Soeharto’s ex-son-in-law who had been implicated in gross human-rights violations during the authoritarian regime. Jokowi’s win was hailed as the triumph of civil society and democracy over Indonesia’s ruling cronies. Dubbed as the ‘People’s President,’ Jokowi was seen to lead the world’s third largest democracy to great success, and in the long run, save the future of democracy in Southeast Asia.¹

Five decades of testy, love-hate diplomatic relations between Beijing and Jakarta had preceded Jokowi’s rise to power. But in just eight years as Indonesia’s chief executive, Jokowi managed to revive, recharge, and tighten the ties that bind China and Indonesia across political, economic, security, and socio-cultural fronts.

In the early 1960s, the two countries had attempted to forge a political alignment and alliances against the “imperialist” West, through Soekarno’s commitment. The relationship, however, failed to withstand the pressures brought by China’s alleged interference in In-

Indonesia's domestic politics, especially in the aftermath of the abortive coup in 1965, which brought a regime change in Jakarta.

Numerous incidents in the 1950s tend to show how Beijing sought to reorient support from the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia and provide political and financial support to the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia). While the precise details of the event remain murky, the New Order regime led by Major General Soeharto managed to overthrow Soekarno from power, and accused China of complicity in the communists' coup attempt.

Bitter diplomatic exchanges followed, prompting Indonesia to suspend bilateral relations in 1967. The Soeharto regime subsequently labeled communism and China as the main threats to Indonesia's national security.

In a sense, Beijing and Jakarta had a love-hate-love relationship for decades:

DATE	EVENTS
9 June 1950	Start of the diplomatic relationship; Indonesia is the first Southeast Asian country to officially establish diplomatic relations with China
November 1953	Signing of the first trade agreement in Beijing
April 1955	Prime Minister Zhou Enlai attends Asia-Africa Conference (KAA) in Bandung where he also signs an Indonesia-China's dual citizenship treaty proposed by the Indonesian Government
23 October 1967 ²	Cessation of diplomatic relations over accusations of China's interference in the Indonesian Communist Party's uprising (G30S/PKI)
23 October 1967	Closing down of Indonesia's embassy office in Beijing, a week after China closed down its embassy office in Jakarta
28 October 1967	China formally announces the suspension of its diplomatic relationship with Indonesia
1967-1990	Cambodian Embassy in Beijing assigned to act on behalf of Jakarta; Romanian Embassy in Jakarta on behalf of Beijing
1989-1990	Discussion between Indonesian President Soeharto and Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Qian Qichen on possible normalization of the two countries' severed diplomatic ties, which leads to the signing of the Common Communiqué "The Resumption of Diplomatic Relations between the Two Countries" in Beijing (3 July 1990)
8 August 1990	Signing of Memorandum of Understanding on Resumption of Diplomatic Relations, officially marking the resumption of diplomatic relations between Indonesia and China, each represented by their respective minister of foreign affairs
November 1990	President Soeharto visits China and signs a Joint Committee on Economy, Trade, and Engineering Partnership

Throughout Soeharto's New Order regime, people of Chinese ethnicity were forced to assimilate completely into the local culture and forbidden from publicly expressing their Chinese heritage. Formal laws and institutions were established to control and limit Chinese religious and traditional celebrations.

Three official issuances enforced the restrictions and fueled biases:

- Presidential Instruction No. 14/1967, which banned Chinese religious celebrations to be carried out publicly. Traditions, including prayers and Lunar New Year celebration, could only be carried out in an inconspicuous manner within the private sphere;
- Presidential Decision, 18 July 1963, which established Lembaga Pembina Kesatuan Bangsa (LPKB), Chinese Indonesian-led government institution that instructed Chinese Indonesians to have their Chinese names changed to Indonesian-sounding names. LPKB went so far to state that the aim of the instruction was to move Chinese Indonesians away from their Chinese roots; and
- Surat Edaran Presidium Kabinet Ampera No. 06/1967 on Chinese-related problems instructed Indonesians not to use the words *Tionghoa* or *Tiongkok* and refer to Chinese-related matters as '*Cina*,' fueling discrimination and racism. In English, *Tionghoa* translates into '*China*,' and *Tiongkok*, into '*persons related to China*.'

The dominance of ethnic Chinese business people in many sectors of the country's economy, however, often attracted jealousy from other Indonesians.³ At the same time, Muslim groups and the military were concerned with China's capacity to influence domestic subversion. By the 1970s, nearly two-thirds of Indonesian elites perceived China as a serious threat to Indonesia.

But by the mid-1980s, Indonesia, lured by China's growing economy, gradually and cautiously moved to normalize its relationship with Beijing. Soeharto also could no longer afford to continue to ignore China's growing power and influence in regional affairs.

Indonesia's decision to re-engage China in 1990 did not receive unanimous support. The political elite, military officers, and some Muslim leaders remained suspicious of China. "Vigilance" remained the code when engaging with China. When preparing official restoration of diplomatic ties, Soeharto maintained that Indonesia "must remain alert to the possibility of a PKI revival after the normalization of ties with China" and "should continue to be vigilant."

The military's suspicion toward China was aggravated by Beijing's policy regarding territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Beijing's growing assertiveness was interpreted as an

indication of how an economically strong and militarily powerful China might act in the future.

In August 1996, Institute of National Resilience Vice Governor Juwono Sudarsono expressed a clear perspective toward China's measure and its regional intent, saying, "(M)y pessimistic projection is that barring the possibility that China can gain access to resources other than the South China Sea area, then ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries will have to face the possibility of imminent military confrontation with China."

THE SHIFT: MAY 1998

The economic crisis that befell Indonesia in mid-1997 prompted one of the most devastating mass riots in the country's history. While the riots that exploded the next year can be partly attributed to the growing dissatisfaction toward Soeharto's authoritarianism, it was the ethnic Chinese community that became the main target of brutal attacks by mobs bent on sowing mayhem.

Beijing's initial reaction to the anti-Chinese riots in Jakarta was relatively muted, with the Chinese government regarding these as purely domestic affairs and avoided diplomatic blunders. Choosing to prioritize its relations with Indonesia, China sought to minimize the impact of the May riots and the victimization of members of the Chinese diaspora.

It was only when it came under strong pressure from its own people did Beijing begin to express its concern and demand more serious attempts from Jakarta to protect the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia -- even as it continued to emphasize the domestic nature of other incidents following the riots.

On 28 July 1998, during an ASEAN meeting in Manila, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan raised the issue with his Indonesian counterpart Ali Alatas. Four months later in November 1998, Chinese President Jiang Zemin conveyed concerns to Indonesian President B.J. Habibie.

China's careful approach to the sensitive nature was demonstrated through the Chinese leaders' expression of concerns. Jiang, for instance, pledged that China "would never try to use people of Chinese origin living in Indonesia to seek political or economic gain there."

China's Ambassador to Indonesia, Chen Shiqui, further made clear that Beijing saw the incidents as "a part of Indonesia's domestic politics. Its resolution must come from the Indonesian government itself. The Chinese government must not act as if it could be the chef in somebody else's kitchen."

In addition, Beijing assured Jakarta that the incidents would not affect overall bilateral relations. In fact, China even offered to help Indonesia cope with its economic crisis. In August 1998, China agreed to sell 50,000 tons of rice to Indonesia and provided a US\$3-million grant for medicine. China also provided a US\$200-million economic loan package to Indonesia and participated in the International Monetary Fund’s rescue plans. Economic cooperation was prioritized as well on the agenda of bilateral talks during visits to Indonesia by Chinese government officials.

China’s measures that deemphasized the ethnic issue and prioritized bilateral stability certainly contributed to calming down Jakarta. President B.J. Habibie reportedly suggested that officials from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong participate in investigating the incidents to alleviate the concerns of the international community and overseas Chinese.

For Jakarta, meanwhile, the fall of the Soeharto dictatorship and the spirit of democratization drove its rigorous efforts to restore relationship with ethnic Chinese Indonesians.

More serious efforts to foster cooperation with China began to take place in the post-Soeharto period, which went hand in hand with the domestic policies of ending the discriminatory practices against the *Tionghoa* community as a part of Indonesia’s democratization commitment.

A succession of four presidents in the next years eased the process significantly.

PRESIDENT	DECLARED POLICY	POLICY ISSUANCE/ACTION
B.J. Habibie (May 1998- October 1999)	Ending discrimination against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia.	Presidential Instruction No. 26/1998, removes the terms <i>pribumi</i> and <i>non-pribumi</i> - Presidential Instruction No. 4/1999 tentang Melaksanakan Ketentuan Presiden No.56/1996 <i>Tentang Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia</i> - Presidential Instruction No. 26/1998 - removes the requirement of <i>Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia (SBKRI) bagi Etnis Tionghoa</i> ; in turn, they can receive <i>Kartu Tanda Penduduk</i> and allow the teaching and learning of the Chinese language.

PRESIDENT	DECLARED POLICY	POLICY ISSUANCE/ACTION
<p>Abdurrahman Wahid (October 1999- July 2001)</p>	<p>The “Look Toward Asia” policy aimed to pursue closer relations with Asian neighbors, including China.</p> <p>China held a special place in foreign policy during his presidency. China was the first country visited by the president after his inauguration (December 1999). The visit marked a new era for a more intensified bilateral partnership.</p> <p>Several achievements from the partnership included financial aid, credit facilities, and cooperation in various fields (monetary, technology, fishery, tourism, and countertrade in energy, i.e., exchange of Indonesian LNG with Chinese products).</p>	<p>Repealed Presidential Instruction No. 14/1946 on the prohibition to conduct religious and cultural practices through Presidential Decree No. 6/2000. Ethnic Chinese religious and cultural ceremonies no longer require permits from the government.</p> <p>Chinese Lunar New Year officially recognized as a tentative holiday (hari libur flutkuatif) through Presidential Decree No. 9/2001.</p>
<p>Megawati Soekarno (2001-2004)</p>	<p>Strengthened relationship, visited Beijing and both countries agreed to strengthen commitments in economic and political relations.</p> <p>Reopened Bank of China branch in Jakarta and the start of cooperation in energy sectors, especially gas and oil.</p>	<p>Chinese Lunar New Year officially recognized as national public holiday through Presidential Decree No. 19/2002.</p>
<p>Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004 - 2014)</p>	<p>Peak of Indonesia-China restored relations with the signing of the Declaration of Strategic Partnership in Jakarta when then-President Hu Jintao was attending the 50th anniversary of Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung.</p> <p>The strategic partnership included mutual cooperation in politics, security, economy, development, and sociocultural alliances.</p> <p>Year 2010 is declared as “Year of Friendship between Indonesia and China.”</p>	<p>Law No. 40/2008 on Peghapusan Racial and Ethnic Discrimination</p> <p>Presidential Decree No. 12/2014 on Pencabutan Surat Edaran Presidium Kabinet Ampera Nomor SE-06/PRES. KAB/6/1967, 28 June 1967.⁴</p>

TURNING POINT: DISASTER-AID DIPLOMACY

Indonesia's wariness toward China began to ease after the latter pledged to help its south neighbors in the aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami. Earlier, the Chinese Embassy in Indonesia had also donated US\$ 100,000 to the Indonesian government for the treatment of victims of the 12 October Bali Bombing.⁵ The tsunami, however, presented to China an even greater opportunity to project itself as the "responsible power" in the region. It rapidly responded with aid, with President Hu Jintao pledging that Beijing would provide "any possible aid in its power to those who need it."

On 6 January 2005, Beijing announced an unprecedented assistance package totaling US\$83 million for the tsunami victims, prior to the UN-backed tsunami summit in Jakarta. This aid package was dubbed to be the largest in the 55-year history of Communist China. Indonesia received a total grant of US\$24.75 million for early-warning systems, shelters, and road infrastructure.

Among other things, China promised to send epidemic-prevention experts and medical teams, as well as help build roads, bridges, and power stations. Minister of Commerce Bo Xilai announced that China would provide another US\$2 million worth of cash and goods, bringing total Chinese tsunami aid to Indonesia to around US\$25 million. During the emergency-relief operations, China also sent medical teams, built temporary medical facilities, and helped evacuate the bodies of victims. China promised as well to collect around US\$30 million from its private companies, non-governmental organizations, and civil institutions.

Arriving in Jakarta for the summit, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao declared, "I do not have a big entourage with me this time, but I'm flying with 16 tons of relief materials, as well as the kind affections of the Chinese people."

Wen remarked that China would "provide unselfish assistance within our (China's) capacity and (would) have no added conditions." For China, its participation in the relief efforts projected its friendliness toward governments and people of the disaster-hit countries. Yet, low-interest loans for the rebuilding of infrastructure for some countries would be given only so long as Chinese companies were involved.

China – Indonesia Relations Under Jokowi

"To win votes, the Indonesian leader needs Chinese cash to build railways and ports. To build those railways and ports he needs to accept the Chinese workers who are losing him votes." This was journalist Jeffrey Hutton's observation in a 2018 opinion piece he wrote for the *South China Morning Post*.

The piece titled "[A Catch-22 from China that could derail Indonesia's Widodo](#)" seems like an accurate prognosis of how China-Indonesia relations unfolded under the two-term Jokowi presidency.⁶ From the get-go, Jokowi signaled that his approach to China would be much more pragmatic – he had expressed hope for more progress in trade and investment with China, and for more Chinese companies to get into infrastructure development.

In his second run for president in 2019, Jokowi bet on China's infrastructure cooperation to secure and boost his votes. Yet, as Chinese investment grew and more Chinese workers entered Indonesia, resentment from citizens grew as well. The general public had the impression that these Chinese-funded projects preferred to use Chinese labor to save costs and boost productivity.⁷ Previously in 2018, Jokowi had enacted the [Presidential Regulation No. 20/2018 on Foreign Workers](#). This was seen as a step forward to 'liberalize' the hiring of foreign workers in relation to the domestic labor market, such as speeding up the time that it takes to process foreign workers' applications. As expected, this regulation ignited the issue of alleged mass employment of Chinese workers to work on Chinese-funded projects related to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Interestingly, in the same year, Premier Li Keqiang addressed Chinese labor issues in Southeast Asia for the first time during his visit to Indonesia.⁸

In November 2014, Jokowi met with Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing; Indonesia joined the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) later the same month. The cooperation developed progressively as Jokowi aligned his [Global Maritime Fulcrum](#) (GMF) ambition with Beijing's 21st Maritime Silk Road in numerous occasions, statements, directives, and policies. Similarly, Chinese officials often try to [link](#) the Belt and Road Initiative with Jokowi's GMF vision for Indonesia.⁹

Jokowi's remarks, November 2014

"From the investors we met, and the records that the World Bank submitted to us, two months ago there were [33 companies leaving China](#), 23 chose Vietnam, 10 others went to Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia. None came to us."

"I don't want to know anymore, earlier there were [119 potential companies](#) to relocate from China, we have to get these companies to Indonesia. If they price the land at IDR 500,000, we have to price it below that at IDR 300,000, for example. If they give Rp. 1 million, we will give Rp. 500,000 (...)"

The BRI and GMF appear to be quite complementary to one another at first glance. The ambitious Indonesian vision emphasizes “maritime infrastructure development,” which fits with the idea of promoting maritime connectivity in a region that is crucial to the Chinese initiative. This helps Indonesia’s inter-island connectivity and domestic development through infrastructure investment and economic diplomacy. For instance, both countries are already collaborating with each other on the development of the flagship BRI project in Indonesia, the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Railway.

During his first term, Jokowi’s GMF appeared to improved sea infrastructure. For example, by 2020, at least 27 new ports had been built across Indonesia. The GMF, however, did little to propel the modernization of the Navy.¹⁰

Indonesia – China Notable Exchanges under the Jokowi Administration

DATE	EVENT
Beijing, 9 November 2014	Indonesia-China bilateral meeting with President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of People. President Jokowi expresses hope that China would continue to become a strategic partner for Indonesia and be made more “concrete” during his tenure. ¹¹
Beijing, 23-24 November 2014	Indonesia signs the MoU to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) , the multilateral international financial institution initiated by China. ¹²
Beijing, 26-27 January 2015	China-Indonesia First High Level Economic Dialogue , Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi, Prime Minister Li Keqiang , Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Economy Sofyan Djalil. Signing of Letter of Intent for cooperation on power plant ¹³
Beijing, 26 March 2015	Jokowi visits China, welcomed by President Xi Jinping and CCP Central Committee Officials/ Jokowi and Xi Jinping held talks at the Great Hall of the People. “ <i>Joint Statement on Strengthening Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the People’s Republic of China and The Republic of Indonesia</i> ” established. Jokowi emphasizes that China’s initiative of building the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road highly agrees with the strategy of Indonesia to build itself a maritime power.
Beijing, 27 March 2015	At the Great Hall of the People, Premier Li Keqiang meets with Jokowi, who came to China on a state visit and to attend the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2015. After the meeting, Li Keqiang and Joko Widodo jointly attend and address the China-Indonesia Economic Cooperation Forum with the theme of “Deepening Mutually Beneficial Cooperation, Sharing Development Opportunities.” ¹⁴ Jokowi also meets with Zhang Dejiang, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress and China’s top legislator . ¹⁵

Indonesia – China Notable Exchanges under the Jokowi Administration

DATE	EVENT
Jakarta, 21-24 April 2015	President Xi Jinping attends the Asian-African Summit and activities commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Bandung Conference at Jokowi's invitation. ¹⁶
Jakarta, 27 May 2015	The deputy-prime-ministerial, people-to-people exchange mechanism between China and Indonesia conference is held. Jokowi's congratulatory message is read by Vice Prime Minister Liu Yandong who co-chairs the meeting and stresses that the mechanism is aimed at providing stronger public support for the vigorous development of bilateral relations. Both sides sign agreements on cooperation and exchanges in education, science, technology, culture, and other sectors. Liu Yandong notes that the exchange mechanism is not only a major strategic decision to focus on the future, but also a commemoration to the 65th anniversary of the establishment of China-Indonesia diplomatic ties, and will produce profound and far-reaching influence on China-Indonesia ties and regional cooperation. ¹⁷
Jakarta, 3 July 2015	A seminar on " Opportunities and Challenges of China-Indonesia Cooperation " is held in Jakarta. The seminar, co-hosted by Chinese People's Association for Peace and Disarmament (CPAPD), Indonesia Academy of Science (LIPI), and the Embassy of the People's Republic of China, is attended by over 70 representatives from government departments, NGOs, research institutions, and business sector representatives from both countries. ¹⁸
Jakarta, 25-29 July 2015	Top Chinese political advisor Yu Zhengsheng, Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), makes a four-day visit to Indonesia, laying solid foundation for further development of bilateral relations. ¹⁹
Jakarta, 20 August 2015	Xu Shaoshi, President Xi Jinping's special envoy and head of the National Development and Reform Commission, meets with Jokowi in Jakarta and submits a feasibility study for the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project to compete for Indonesia's open bid for the project announced the previous month. ²⁰ China pledges to enhance local procurement, with loan repayment condition of 40 years with a grace period of 10 years. Xu says China has formed a complete system for high-speed rail design, construction, operation, and equipment, and that it meets ISO requirements. ²¹
Jakarta, September 2015	Premier Li Keqiang meets at Ziguanqge of Zhongnanhai with Indonesia's People's Consultative Assembly Chairman Zulkifli Hasan. Vice Chairman of the National Committee of CPPCC Zhang Qingli attends the meeting. ²²
New York, 30 September 2015	At the UN headquarters in New York, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets with Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, exchanging views on bilateral and regional cooperation. ²³
Antalya, 15 November 2015	President Xi Jinping meets with Jokowi . ²⁴

Indonesia – China Notable Exchanges under the Jokowi Administration

DATE	EVENT
Walini, West Java, 21 January 2016	Indonesia and China launch the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway Project . Chinese State Councilor Wang Yong and Jokowi attend the event. Hanggoro Budwi Wiryawan, President Director of Indonesia-China joint venture PT Kereta Cepat Indonesia, says that the project is expected to be completed in early 2019. ²⁵ Wang Yong also meets with then Indonesian State-Owned Enterprises Minister Rini Soemarno. ²⁶
Jakarta, 13 April 2016	Song Tao, senior official of the Communist Party of China, visits Jokowi at the Palace during his Southeast Asian trip. ²⁷
Jakarta, 9 May 2016	The 2nd Meeting of China-Indonesia High-Level Economic Dialogue is held in Jakarta. State Councilor Yang Jiechi and Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Darmin Nasution of Indonesia co-chairs the meeting. ²⁸ In a separate meeting, Yang Jiechi discusses bilateral cooperation with Jokowi and then Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs Luhut Binsar Panjaitan. ²⁹
Guiyang, 1 August 2016	The 2nd Meeting of the Cultural and People-to-people Exchange Mechanism between China and Indonesia is hosted by Vice Premier Liu Yandong, and then Indonesian Coordinating Minister of Human Development and Culture Puan Maharani. Eight cooperation deals covering areas of education, health, sports, tourism, youth, and media are agreed on and signed. ³⁰
Beijing, May 2017	Jokowi attends the Belt and Road Summit in Beijing
Beijing, 17 June 2017	Indonesia's Presidential Envoy, former Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan visits Beijing and meets, among others, with Vice Prime Minister Zhang Gaoli and Meng Jianzhu , Head of the Commission for Political and Legal Affairs of the Communist Party of China. ³¹
Beijing, 21 August 2017	The 6th Meeting of Vice-Premier-Level Dialogue . Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi and visiting Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs Wiranto co-chair the meeting in Beijing. ³²
Beijing, 22 August 2017	The 3rd High-Level Economic Level Dialogue Meeting , Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi and visiting Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Darmin Nasution co-chair the meeting, call for deepening of cooperation and exploring new opportunities in emerging industries. Indonesia says it is ready to explore cooperative potential in such areas as connectivity, trade and investment, finance, and energy. ³³
Jakarta, 28-29 November 2017	3rd High-Level Meeting People-to-People Dialogue (Vice Minister Liu Yandong and then Indonesian Coordinating Minister of Human Development and Culture Puan Maharani) and Indonesia-China Science, Technology, and Innovation Co-operation Forum. Liu Yandong also visits Yogyakarta and Solo to promote and develop the use of science and technology in Indonesia. ³⁴ During the trip Liu Yandong also meets with ASEAN Secretary-General Le Luong Minh and the permanent representatives of the 10 ASEAN countries and Jokowi to discuss mutually beneficial cooperation under the framework of the BRI in various fields. ³⁵

Indonesia – China Notable Exchanges under the Jokowi Administration

DATE	EVENT
Beijing, 12 April 2018	Chinese Premier Li Keqiang meets with Indonesia's Presidential Envoy and Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan in Beijing and calls for more pragmatic cooperation and linking the BRI with Indonesia development strategies. ³⁶
Bogor/Jakarta, 7 May 2018	China-Indonesia Bilateral Meeting in Istana Negara . Prime Minister Li Keqiang meets with Jokowi. Signed are two MoUs, i.e., Regional comprehensive economic corridor development cooperation (signed by Luhut Binsar Panjaitan), and cooperation agreements in two dam projects (Jenelata Dam in Gowa, South Sulawesi, and Riam Dam, in Banjar Regency, South Kalimantan) (Minister of Public Works and Public Housing Basuki Hadimuljono and Chairman of the Agency for International Development Cooperation China Wang Xiao Tao). ³⁷
Jakarta, 20 March 2019	Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou attends High-Level Dialogue on Indo-Pacific Cooperation in Jakarta ³⁸
Jakarta, 20 September 2019	Song Tao , Chinese Foreign Relation Advisor and the Head of International Liaison Department of Chinese Communist Party, visits President Jokowi at the Presidential Palace and has a lunch meeting with PDIP Chairperson and former Indonesia president Megawati Soekarnoputri at the Mandarin Hotel. ³⁹
12 May 2020	Chinese State Councilor and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe talks over the phone with the Indonesian Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto. Both call for continued communication and cooperation in all fields between their countries' armed forces. Prabowo expresses his gratitude to the Chinese armed forces for its support and assistance . ⁴⁰
11 July 2022	Jokowi meets with China's Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi at Jakarta's Merdeka Palace ; they discuss multiple bilateral and international issues, such as the Ukraine-Russia war, and the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway project. Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Masudi and Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment also attends the meeting. ⁴¹

Notable Exchanges under Jokowi

According to Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, between 2015 and 2022, at least 71 exchange agreements were signed and sealed between various Indonesian government institutions and the government of China, including treaties, memorandums of understanding, and other formal correspondences.

Among these agreements is the [Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the](#)

[Government of the People's Republic of China \(2017 -2021\)](#).⁴² A virtual mother document of the stretched, sweeping scope of China-Indonesia relations under Jokowi, its stated goal and coverage is: "Strengthening bilateral cooperation, Politics, Law, and Security Cooperation, Defense Cooperation, Non-Traditional Defense Cooperation, *Pemberantasan Pembalakan Liar Produk Hutan dan Perdagangan terkait lainnya*, Illicit Drugs, Human Trafficking, Corruption and Money Laundering, Law, Maritime, Trade, Industry, Investment, Education, Socio-Cultural, Social Welfare, Society's Welfare, Migrant Workers, Disaster Reduction, Environmental Protection."

The Plan of Action practically covers all areas of cooperation – from development to research, education, and security, among others. Under "Political, Legal, and Security Cooperation," Indonesia and China agree to respect each other's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.

While China reaffirms its "support for the efforts of the Indonesian government to maintain national unity and territorial integrity," Indonesia "reiterates its continued commitment to One-China Policy" and support for China's peaceful reunification."

Interestingly, the Political, Legal, and Security Cooperation section also contains cooperation in developing democracy and human rights (*Kerja Sama dalam Membangun Demokrasi dan Memajukan Hak Asasi Manusia*). The word 'democracy' is explicitly mentioned in the Indonesian text, but is substituted with *Good Governance* in the English version of the Memorandum. This is the only notable difference between the Indonesian and English version of the Plan of Action. This section of the Plan reads:

"*Kerja Sama dalam **Membangun Demokrasi dan Hak Asasi Manusia** (Cooperation in **Good Governance** and Human Rights)*

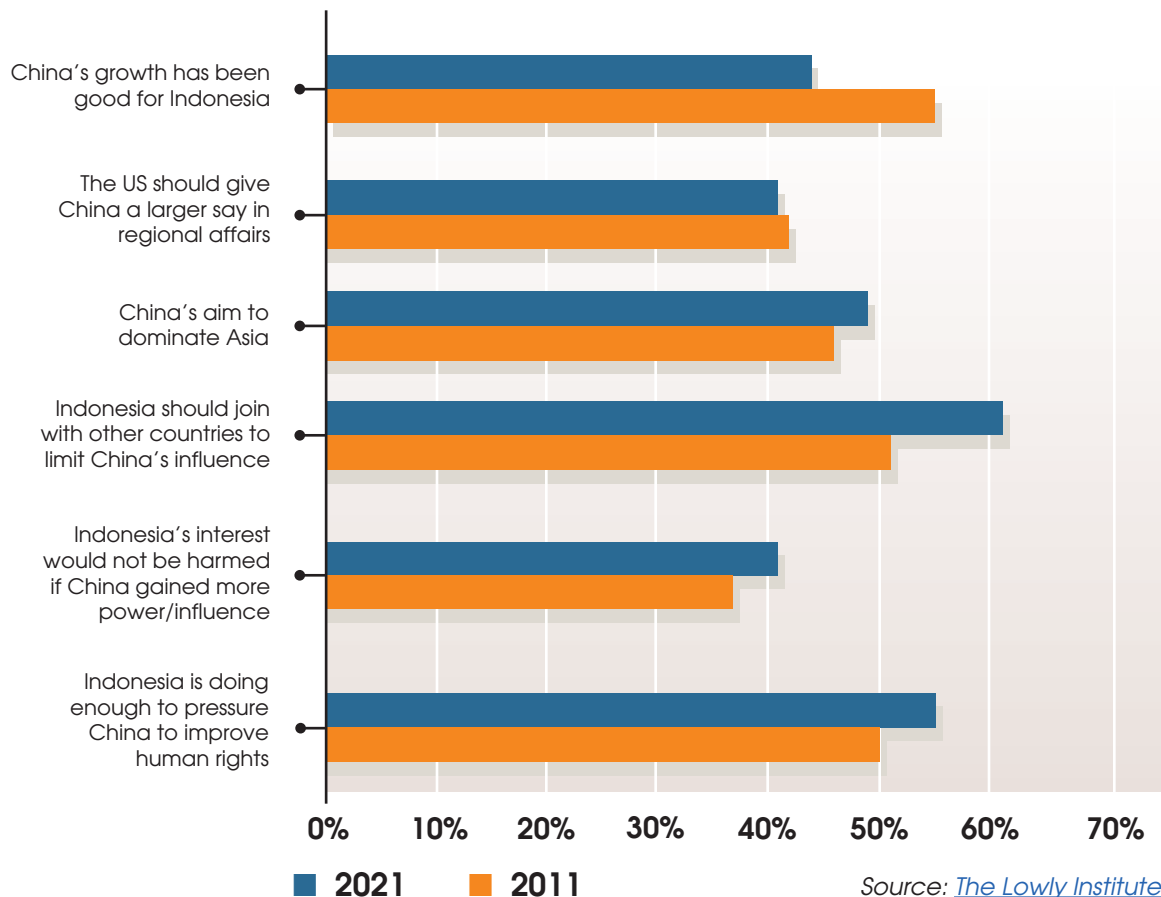
- "Promote ties at various levels among the peoples of the two countries to exchange views and experiences in an effort to enhance the promotion of human rights and good governance;
- "Encourage exchanges of visits by government officials at various levels as a means to share and learn from each other's experiences in promoting human rights;
- "Increase consultation and coordination in further promoting cooperation in multi-lateral for a such as United Nation Human Rights Council; and
- "Collaborate to enhance the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms through regional dialogues, seminar and workshop, education and awareness-raising activities, as well as exchanges of best practices and other capacity-building initiatives."

In the economic development section, Jokowi’s GMI seems to be shoulder to shoulder with China’s BRI, with both countries agreeing to “(explore) the possibility of synergizing efforts on the initiative of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road proposed by Xi Jinping and the strategy of the Global Maritime Fulcrum initiated by President Joko Widodo.”

Under International and Regional Cooperation, both countries agree to maintain regional peace and emerge as parties that offer alternative resolutions to international and regional disputes: “As two of the biggest countries in the region, Indonesia and China have been the beneficiaries of a peace dividend. Both countries have common interests and responsibilities in key global and regional issues. Indonesia and China agreed to deepen cooperation in international and regional affairs to offer an alternative kind of visions for our part of the world or the region and to engage countries in widening the cultural peace in the region and the world.”

Attitudes to China

Please say whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the following statements (% that strongly agree or agree).



Yet as official relations between Beijing and Jakarta warmed up, trust in China was decreasing among Indonesians, who associated more negativity with China than with the United States. The proportion of Indonesians wanting to see their country play a bigger role in regard to China would also significantly increase.

Still, bilateral relations were getting better and more stable – enough to give ethnic Chinese Indonesians confidence to enter the political arena. The 2014 polls, in fact, saw a total of 315 Chinese Indonesians competing in the regional-representative races.⁴³

Identity politics, however, gathered further momentum in the 2016 Jakarta gubernatorial elections. The popular incumbent, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, an ethnic Chinese and a Christian, soon became the target of large-scale demonstrations by Islamist groups that accused him of committing blasphemy against Islam. The situation yet again conflated Indonesia-China relations with internal competition for power.⁴⁴

MOST PERVASIVE PRESENCE IN INDONESIA

Indonesia's importance to China's Belt and Road Initiative can be traced back to the project's inception. The 21st Maritime Silk Road or MSR, which would later become the 'road' component of the BRI, was first announced to the world during Xi Jinping's visit to Indonesia in 2013. The MSR supposedly aims to promote maritime cooperation and trade between China and members of ASEAN, and Indonesia in particular.⁴⁵

The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the lead agency for BRI's implementation, defines the initiative as a "systematic project of integration of national development strategies that are aiming at all market potentials, promoting investment and consumption, creating demand and employment and encouraging people-to-people exchanges."⁴⁶ This definition is integral to the discussion as the following sections reflect the *systematic* methods and implications of BRI, and ultimately, China's presence in Indonesia.

In the framework of BRI's six economic corridors, Indonesia becomes the central piece of the China-Indochina Peninsula Corridor, taking into account Indonesia's strategic position in maritime connectivity in that it links the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

In addition, Indonesia became one of the 50 [founding countries](#) of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Chinese government's multilateral development bank to finance infrastructure in Asia to support BRI's implementation.⁴⁷

One of Indonesia's main economic concerns where BRI comes into play is Jakarta's inadequate and underdeveloped infrastructure. The country's poor infrastructure develop-

ment has been cited as the factor that has deprived Indonesia of a significant amount in its national income.

Numerous research studies have articulated the importance of boosting infrastructure to stimulate socio-economic growth, increasing capital inflow and employment opportunities, and improving human capital through greater access to essential services.⁴⁸ Funding, financing, and budget constraints have been notably known as factors that have hindered Indonesia's infrastructure development.

The National Mid-Term Development Plan (*Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Nasional* or RPJMN) 2015-2019 estimated that Indonesia would need at least IDR 5,500 trillion or around US\$460 billion during the period, to support economic growth of six to seven percent in 2019.

The government's ability to raise funds through debt issuance is restricted by law, however. Under existing laws, the government's budget deficit cannot exceed three percent of GDP. Yet still, the amount of investment needed to sustain the country's economic development is simply enormous.⁴⁹

Against this backdrop, Indonesia has responded positively toward the Chinese initiative that could boost its infrastructure development goal. BRI's objective to promote infrastructure and connectivity development aligns quite well with Jakarta's effort to improve the availability and quality of infrastructure, specifically in promoting connectivity within the country and across the region.

In May 2017, Jokowi attended the first BRI Summit in Beijing, recalling that the Initiative's main goal is to improve the transport and logistics facilities of participating countries. In addition, Jokowi cited BRI's alignment with Indonesia's historical slogan '*Jalesveva Jayamahe* (In Sea We Triumph)' and its ambition to become the Global Maritime Fulcrum.⁵⁰ It is worth noting again that the issue of maritime fulcrum has been one of Jokowi's main policies since he first took power as president in late 2014.

On 17 March 2017, a month prior to the first BRI summit, Jokowi issued Presidential Decree No. 16/2017 on Indonesian Ocean Policy. The decree was constructed to facilitate the development of GMF. At the time, Jokowi's target was quite clear: reducing logistics costs from 23.6 percent in 2015 to 19.2 percent in 2019. The availability of quality infrastructure was obviously crucial to meet this target, and BRI projects are aimed precisely to facilitate infrastructure development and alternative financing to achieve such a goal.

WHAT, WHERE ARE THE BRI PROJECTS?

For good reason, there is growing critical literature and public concern in Indonesia about BRI investments and their adverse impact, notably on the environment, the social wellbeing of communities, and the rights of workers and citizens. Studies have expounded on the sociological and ecological costs of China's BRI projects in Indonesia, particularly in four major infrastructure types wherein BRI projects are present, i.e., Roads and Railways, Coal-fired Power Plants, Hydro Power Plants, and Industrial Complexes.⁵¹

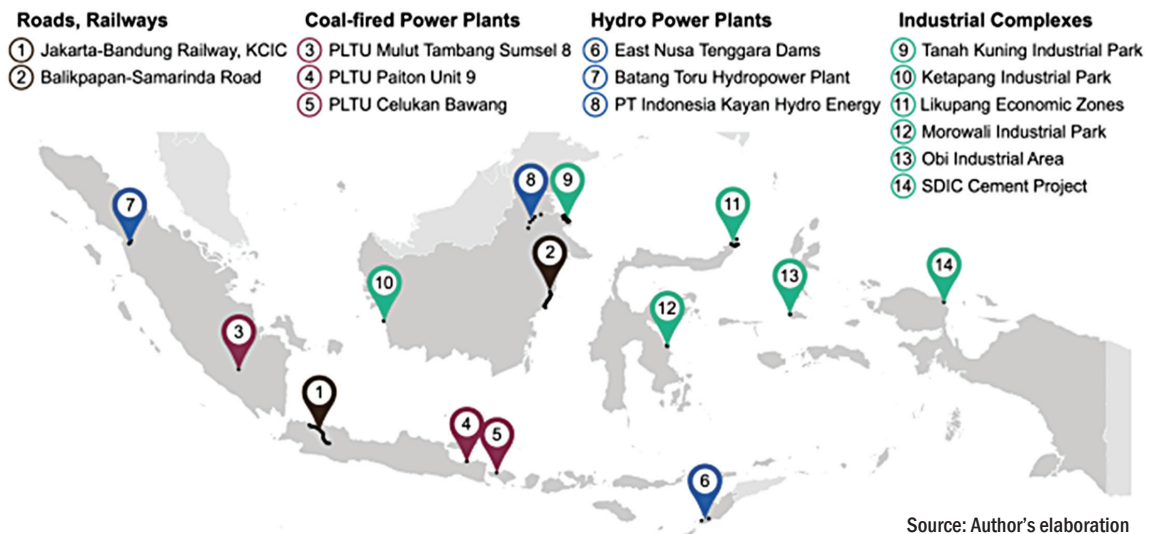
In mapping what and where these projects are located, BRI investments are revealed to be in the most lucrative and strategic sectors of Indonesia.⁵²

China is also present in Indonesia's New Capital City: Nusantara in Kalimantan. It has been reported that the project receives cement supply from Hongshi Holding Group, a Chinese-owned company recorded to have previously invested in a cement factory project in Jember, East Java.

PROJECT NAME	PROJECT CLUSTER	ACTIVITY	LOCATION
Roads, Railways	Coal-fired Power Plants	Hydro Power Plants	Industrial Complexes
Jakarta-Bandung Railway, KCIC	PLTU Mulut Tambang Sumsel 8	East Nusa Tenggara Dams	Tanah Kuning Industrial Park
Balikpapan-Samarinda Road	PLTU Paiton Unit 9	Batang Toru Hydropower Plant	Ketapang Industrial Park
MRT East-West Line	PLTU Celukan Bawang	PT Indonesia Kayan Hydro Energy	Likupang Economic Zones
Sulawesi Railway (connecting South and North Sulawesi)	Bengkulu Coal-Fired Power Plant Construction		Morowali Industrial Park
Manado-Bitung Toll Road Project			Obi Industrial Area
Pemalang-Batang Toll Road			SDIC Cement Project
Bakauheni-Terbanggi Besar Toll Road			Tanggung LNG Train 3
Pandaan-Malang Toll Road			
Cileunyi-Sumedang-Dawuan Toll Road			
Solo-Kertosono Toll Road			

Map of BRI Projects⁵³

(Global Development Policy Center, China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Indonesia)



The Oligarchs’ Way: National Vital Object and National Strategic Project

The Indonesian National Strategic Project status

To boost Indonesia’s economic growth through infrastructure development, Indonesia established the Committee for Acceleration of Priority Infrastructure Delivery (KPIP) to select projects considered to be strategic and have great urgency and would therefore be **National Strategic Projects**.

The list of these projects is approved through Presidential Regulation No. 109/2020. The Indonesian government provides facilities for the convenience of the project development, acceleration of infrastructure delivery, and issuance of relevant regulation and permits.

■ *There’s already District Military Command and Mobile Brigade Corps* station near the Weda Bay industrial park, maybe it is even still considered inside the area, not even 1 kilometer (away).” -- Anonymous grass root activist.*

** Komando Rayon Militer & Mako Brimob Brimob

■ *“They are hiding behind the country’s vital objects to destroy society at the grassroots level.” Yayasan Srikandi Lestari*

• National Vital Object (Objek Vital Nasional) •

National Vital Object is defined as “Areas/locations, buildings/installations, businesses that concern the livelihoods of many people, state interests and/or sources of state revenue that are strategic in nature.” Investment projects that are considered as National Vital Objects receive protection from authorities against threats, security disturbances, and public disorder. The Indonesian government ensures this through [Presidential Decree and Regulation of the Head of the Indonesian National Police](#) on security assistance for national vital objects.

Since NSP’s inception in 2016, Jokowi has accorded National Strategic Project status to some of China’s biggest BRI investments in Indonesia.

PROJECT NAME	CORE BUSINESS	LOCATION	CONTRACT/ PARTNERSHIP TYPE (B2B/G2G/ JOINT VENTURE)	ESTIMATED PROJECT VALUE (US\$)	STATUS
Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Railway	High-speed train	West Java (West of Indonesia)	Joint Venture (PT Kereta Cepat Indonesia China)	1,587,000,000	NSP 2020, project completion delayed
Ketapang Industrial Park	Bauxite Smelters	West Borneo (North West of Indonesia)	Joint Venture (PT Well Harvest Winning Alumina Refinery)	55,000,000	NSP 2020
Morowali Industrial park	Nickel smelters, stainless steel car battery production	Central Sulawesi	Joint Venture (PT. Indonesia Ruipu Nickel And Chrome Alloy)	320,000,000	NSP 2020
Weda Bay Industrial Park	Nickel smelters, mining sites	Central Halmahera, North Maluku (East of Indonesia)	Joint Venture (PT Indonesia Weda Bay)	10,000,000,000	NSP 2020, fully operational
Obi Industrial Park	Nickel smelters, stainless steel car battery production	North Maluku (East of Indonesia)	Joint Venture (PT. Halmahera persada Legend)	92,700,000	NSP 2020, fully operational
Hydro-Power Plant, Batang Toru, Kalimantan	Energy	North Borneo (North of Indonesia)	Joint Venture (PT North Sumatra Hydro Energy)	1,600,000,000	NSP 2020, project delayed

PROJECT NAME	CORE BUSINESS	LOCATION	CONTRACT/ PARTNERSHIP TYPE (B2B/G2G/ JOINT VENTURE)	ESTIMATED PROJECT VALUE (US\$)	STATUS
Palembang Light Rail Transit (LRT) Construction Project	Transportation	South Sumatera (West of Indonesia)	State-Owned Company (G2G)	827,000,000	NSP 2016, fully operational
Manado-Bitung Toll Road	Toll Road	North Sulawesi (North East of Indonesia)	State Owned Company (G2G)	327,500,000	NSP 2017, fully operational
Pemalang-Batang Toll Road	Toll Road	Central Java	Joint Venture	211,000,000	NSP 2017, fully operational
Bakauheni-Terbanggi Besar Toll Road	Toll Road	Bandar Lampung (South of Sumatera)	PT Hutama Karya (B2B)	529,000,000	Completed, NSP 2017
Pandaan-Malang Toll Road	Toll Road	East Java	Joint Venture (PT Jasamarga Pandaan Malang)	264,000,000	Completed, PSN 2017, fully operational 2020
Cileunyi-Sumedang-Dawuan Toll Road	Toll Road	West Java	State-Owned Company (G2G)	219,300,000	PSN 2016,
Solo-Kertosono Toll Road	Toll Road	Central Java	State-Owned Company (G2G)	198,700,000	Completed, not yet PSN
Balikpapan Samarinda Toll Road	Toll Road	East Borneo	State-Owned Company (G2G)	53,400,000	In Progress, PSN 2016,
PLTU Celukan Bawang	Coal-Fired Power Plant	Bali	Joint Venture (PT General Energy Bali)	473,000,000	2007-2015, NSP regulation not yet formulated, but project highly prioritized

Source: AidData, Presidential Regulations on NSP

BEFRIENDING THE OLIGARCH: WRECKING ECOSYSTEM AND SMASHING RIGHTS

Wrecking the Ecosystem and Livelihood

China's BRI projects in Indonesia, particularly in the four major infrastructure types wherein these are present have mainly benefited from and are protected by their status as National Strategic Projects and National Vital Objects. Yet little protection has been given to the residents of the areas where these projects take place or to the surrounding environment.

• *The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway* •

Crowned as China's landmark BRI project in Indonesia, the [Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway \(JBHSR\)](#) is the first high-speed railway construction in the country as well as Southeast Asia. In 2015, the Indonesian government awarded the contract for a US\$6 billion Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail to a group of Chinese and domestic state-owned enterprises known as PT Kereta Cepat Indonesia-China (KCIC). PT KCIC is 60 percent owned by a group of Indonesian state enterprises and 40 percent owned by China Railway International Group, a subsidiary of the state-owned conglomerate, China Railway Group Limited.

In spite of the early optimism surrounding the project, the HSR's timeline was rapidly derailed by social and economic issues, from [land acquisition](#), [environmental impacts](#), and [safety concerns](#) surrounding the construction site, to [project delays](#), [unexpectedly exorbitant cost](#), and [cost overrun](#).

In an interview, green group WALHI Jawa Barat head Meiki Paendong said it has learned about numerous irregularities and complaints throughout the development of Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway.

The stories from the residents the organization works with were concerning. Initially, the residents of Tipar Silir Asih housing complex, Padalarang Village, West Bandung Regency, were informed about the construction of a tunnel nearby using a bore. But in September 2019, they woke up to the sound of a huge blast. The residents tried to visit the tunnel site and asked about the incident, but received little information even as the blasting continued. Not long after, large cracks began to appear in their area. Said Paendong: "Of course, they were worried that the rainwater will get into the cracks, and if nothing is to be done, the land will collapse, or there will be landslides."

KCIC sent a geology expert team to inspect and analyze Tipa Silir Village after the residents complained about the cracks. At first, the experts came from Institut Teknologi Bandung,

currently known as the best engineering university in Indonesia. Yet, after some time, the team was changed by KCIC.

“The residents were disappointed by the changing of the team,” Paendong said. “The ITB team was more transparent with the residents. The new team seemed to cover up the process and did not engage with the residents.”

The conclusion that the team made eventually did not explicitly mention the cause of the cracks; the report only said that these had occurred recently. The residents firmly believe that the blasting was the source of the problem, as there were no other incidents that could possibly cause such cracks within the span of years.

“It was so unfortunate since the residents were only concerned about their safety,” Paendong said. “They only asked for an independent team to re-check their areas. If the layer or structure of the soil on which their house stands is no longer safe, then compensate them for their land and building. But if according to the results is still safe, they only demand that they properly repair the houses. That’s it, they are willing to stay there, but their houses should be repaired.”

WALHI has alleged that many of those affected by the construction had not received enough information about the project and little compensation. WALHI discovered that there was no negotiation process between KCIC and the residents. “KCIC team only came to their houses and inform the amount of compensation for the land,” said Paendong.” In the process, the State Attorney role was also only to ensure that they receive the compensation. But regarding the amount, there is no negotiation between the government, KCIC, and the residents. The fairness of the compensation process is questioned by the residents.”

Another story from farmers in Depok Village, Purwakarta highlights the irresponsibility of KCIC. Farmers have complained that the excavation waste were disposed near their rice fields and affected the irrigation system. When WALHI Jawa Barat accompanied the farmers to complain to KCIC, officials there claimed that the water and land pollution was the responsibility of the third-party contractor that conducted the excavation and not theirs.

WALHI Jawa Barat has sent letters to numerous parties, including Chinese banks financing the project and the Embassy of China for Indonesia, Chinese Ministry of Environment, Foreign Affairs, and others, searching for accountability and aid for the affected residents. So far, it has received only one reply, via a phone call from the Chinese Embassy. According to Paendong, the Embassy said that it did not interfere with business-to-business projects.

Source: [PT PLN Persero](#)

PANGKALAN Susu Steam Fired Power Plant (Coal) is a power plant owned by the consortium of Sinohydro Corporation Limited and PT Nusantara Energi Mandiri. The project was initially estimated to cost US\$235.9 million, but the figure wound up to be about US\$329 million in total. The project consists of two initial 220MW units and two additional 200MW units situated in Tanjung Pasir Village, Pangkalan Susu District in the Langkat Regency of North Sumatra Province, Indonesia.

[Environmental Justice Atlas](#) recorded some of the visible environmental, health, and social impacts of the project, such as air pollution, biodiversity loss, occupational disease, loss of livelihood and potential respiratory disease. Yayasan Srikandi Lestari, a women-led local organization in the area, described how it has been for residents there: “Fishers are not allowed to get close to the pier due to security reasons. The company said that this is because some properties were stolen, but this should not mean that the people who are looking for food are prohibited from approaching it. Since long ago there were lots of fish because there is a shipwreck that created an ecosystem. A fisher was threatened with being shot by the marines and KAMLA (Indonesian Maritime Security Agency). The public relations officer clearly said that the sea near the jetty pier belongs to the PLTU, and it has been leased. That’s crazy.”

“We tried sending letters to the Chinese consulates and Embassy in Indonesia for dialogues, there were a number of them.” Yayasan Srikandi Lestari said. “We did not



receive any response. (We feel that) the communication channel is closed.”

The group also attempted to ask for help from local government agencies. When confronted about the plant’s detrimental impact on the environment, the local environmental agency told the group, “In every activity, there has to be something that has to be sacrificed.” With respect to the health impact, the local health officials said that it is the company that should bear the responsibility for whatever effects the plant’s activities are having on the residents, even as they asserted that there was no conclusive report stating that the PLTU was causing the respiratory and skin infections.

“We also asked for the local environmental agencies to check the air and water quality, and they said that they are limited in resources,” Yayasan Srikandi Lestari said. “So we asked again, why then they signed the quarterly reports. They only answered: ‘Ma’am, if we do not sign it, our (re: the area’s) electricity may be cut off.’”



Photo source: [Rabul Sawal, Project Multatuli](#)

Malnutrition, Acute Respiratory Infection, Restriction of Press, and Information on Nickel Factory Operation on Obi Island

Obi Island (North Maluku) is the location of a China-backed nickel smelter operation. Most of the nickel processed in Obi Island is exported to China to support its 'green and low-carbon energy' policies. A study has found that the Obi Island venture is among the BRI projects in Indonesia that pose the greatest environmental risks, notably high rates of vegetation loss and high carbon density.

Activities at the nickel factory have been reportedly triggered respiratory disease among the village children. The island has seen a significant increase in acute respiratory infections recently. Obi now has the highest number of malnutrition cases in Halmahera Regency as well.

The Regent of South Halmahera, Usman Sidik, has expressed regret over the presence of a number of mining companies on Obi Island. "(There is a) high number of people suffering from acute respiratory infection on Obi Island. Not only that, the highest number of malnutrition is on Obi Island even though there is a big investment there."⁵⁴

Harita Nickel is owned by two of Indonesia's big conglomerates and two subsidiaries of the Chinese firm Xinxing Ductile Iron Pipes. Harita Nickel runs the nickel-processing smelter in the island. Harita controls 20 percent and Xinxing 80 percent of that project. With a limited renewable energy potential in an area of 3,048 sq kms, the island produce and export nickel ore as the raw material for electric-vehicle batteries.

The news media have been restricted from accessing Obi Island. Port authorities used COVID-19 screening posts to "filter" the people entering the island by questioning them about the purpose of their visit. When the journalists showed their press identification, they were escorted to a different building. Initially, they were told that this was part of COVID-19 prevention measures. But the authorities started intimidating them and eventually barred them from entering the island. An activist group later helped the journalists access the island through an unofficial entry channel by going late at night and avoiding the authorities' patrols. The journalists could not be reached to be interviewed for this research, but their Obi Island investigation report described their experience at the port as going through "repressive acts by authorities before entering the island."

TRADE, FISCAL, ECONOMIC TIES

Despite disagreements founded on historical conflicts, China and Indonesia maintain strong trade relations. Beijing has been Jakarta's important, if not largest, trading partner. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, this partnership became even stronger. In 2020, China was Indonesia's top export destination, accounting for more than 16 percent of the nation's total exports. That year, the total value of Indonesia's trade with China topped US\$78.5 billion.

The data released by Chinese Customs state that the total value of Indonesia's trade with China in 2020 would reach US\$78.5 billion. The main products that Indonesia [exported](#) to China were ferroalloys (US\$4.55 billion), coal briquettes (US\$2.67 billion), and palm oil (US\$2.47 billion).

Between 1995 and 2020, the exports of Indonesia to China increased at an annualized rate of 11.7 percent, from US\$2.05 billion in 1995 to US\$32.6 billion in 2020. By comparison, [China](#) in 2020 exported US\$40.8 billion to [Indonesia](#). The main products exported by [China](#) are [telephones](#) (US\$1.95 billion), [broadcasting equipment](#) (US\$1.57 billion), and [computers](#) (US\$1.13 billion).

From 1995 to 2020, Chinese exports to Indonesia increased at an annualized rate of 13.8 percent, or US\$1.62 billion in 1995 to US\$40.8 billion in 2020.⁵⁵ In 2021, Chinese Customs noted that the value could reach US\$124.34 billion, with a growth rate of 58.43 percent compared to 2020.⁵⁶

Friend or Foe? Elites' Perspectives

“Compared to other countries that attempted to balance China’s power, such as the AUKUS (re: Australia, etc) that enhance military capacity including nuclear in the region, China does relatively few of such activities. In the issue of South China Sea, indeed, we had many stand-offs in the past such as the presence of the warships and other activities in the North Natuna Sea. But when Indonesia protested, China easily stepped back from the territory. Hence, the elites tend to look at opportunities presented by China (re: investment, trade, businesses, etc.) It is understandable that they are given conveniences, such as the National Strategic Project status and other protection.”
– political scientist



In 2019, the two countries signed an agreement that would expand the use of the Chinese yuan in Indonesia. In September 2021, Indonesia and China put into effect a [local currency settlement](#) (LCS) agreement to boost direct investment and commerce between the two nations. This was over a year after a memorandum of understanding on the subject was signed by Bank Indonesia (BI) and the People’s Bank of China (PBOC). The mechanism, according to BI’s report, was anticipated to help businesses by lowering transaction costs, offering alternative financing in local currencies for trade and direct investment, expanding the options for hedging, and reducing the exposure to different currencies in international transactions.⁵⁷ The [Bilateral Currency Swap](#) was renewed in January 2022 to allow for the exchange of local currencies between the two central banks of up to CNY 250 billion or IDR 550 trillion (approximately US\$ 38.8 billion).⁵⁸

Security Sector Partnership

The ties that bind China and Indonesia continue to strengthen through strategic partnerships in various security aspects, including military trade, personnel training, policy docking, and joint exercises and defense technology, particularly after the signing of the 2005 Strategic Partnership.

Soon after, a Bilateral Defense Dialogue was held in Jakarta in July 2006 to discuss security issues in the region. The dialogue served one of the purposes of the partnership: as a medium of communication for each country to be on the “same page” on global and regional security issues, and to foster conflict resolution in the Asia Pacific.⁵⁹

Despite rising tensions in South China Sea and the ramping up of defense measures by the military throughout from 1996 to 2008, Indonesia has seen China as a counterbalance to Western military influence, and a more dependable supplier of weapons.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, China has on occasion reminded Indonesia

about what its “position” should be in the global defense and territorial milieu.

The Australia-U.K.-U.S. cooperation or AUKUS introduced another chapter for the South-China Sea and maritime tensions to Indonesia. The AUKUS cooperation on Australian acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines has been widely viewed as [strategic deterrence](#) by Washington and Canberra against China’s aggressive naval expansion in the South China Sea.

Lying between China and Australia, the vast archipelagic expanse of Indonesia hosts strategic sea lanes linking the Indian and Pacific oceans, and connecting the South China Sea with waters off northern Australia. Submarines may pass undetected through its deep-sea trenches.⁶¹

Indonesia has argued that sharing nuclear technology for military purposes [contradicts](#) the objectives of the Non-Proliferation Nuclear Weapon Treaty, according to a leaked draft submission to the United Nations ahead of the treaty’s 10th conference.⁶²

In September 2021, Indonesia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued [a statement](#) on Australia’s nuclear-powered Submarines Program. It outlined how Indonesia takes notes cautiously and was deeply concerned with Australian Government’s decision and the continuing arms race in the region.⁶³

A month later, Retno Marsudi and her counterpart, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, met in Indonesia and vowed to enhance bilateral ties, echoing shared concerns over AUKUS. Both noted serious implications to nuclear proliferation caused by the AUKUS agreement for cooperation on Australian acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines.⁶⁴

There has been some friction, however, between China and Indonesia, especially regarding the South China Sea. In October 2021, China demanded that Indonesia stop drilling for oil and natural gas in an area that both countries regard as theirs. Two letters from Chinese diplomats to Indonesia’s foreign ministry demanded that Indonesia halt drilling at a temporary offshore rig as it was taking place in supposedly Chinese territory. In a separate letter, China also protested against the predominantly land-based Garuda Shield military exercises that took place during the standoff. An Indonesian lawmaker briefed on the letter said that Indonesia’s reply was very firm: “We are not going to stop the drilling because it is our sovereign right.” Yet, he added, Jakarta played down the tension of the standoff publicly. According to the legislator, Indonesia’s leaders wanted to be “as silent as possible because, if it was leaked to any media, it would create a diplomatic incident.”⁶⁵

Indonesia-China Security Cooperation and Partnership

DATE	EVENT/ACTIVITY
2006	The First Indonesia-China Defense Dialogue
2007	Agreement to enhance technological cooperation
February 2012	Senior Chinese military official Guo Boxiong calls for closer cooperation in the military field with Indonesia during Indonesia's Defense Minister Purnomo Yudiantoro visit to Beijing. ⁶⁶
July 2012	General Jing Zhiyuan , Commander of China's PLA Strategic Missile Corps and a member of the Central Military Commission, visits Indonesia to increase cooperation between the two countries in the field of defense and to follow up cooperation agreements with then Indonesian Defense Minister Purnomo Yudiantoro. They also discuss plans to conduct joint exercise for the two countries' naval special forces. Former secretary general of Ministry of Defense Vice Marshal Eris Heryanto says, "This exercise is aimed at knowing how to secure the two countries' maritime borders." ⁶⁷
January 2013	The Fifth Indonesia-China Defense Consultation Forum is held at the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Headquarters. ⁶⁸
September 2014	Bilateral Defense Consultation Forum in China. Both sides remark that during the last five years, defense ties between Indonesia and China have developed through mutual visits by high-ranking officials, exchange of student officers, and joint exercises. ⁶⁹
Beijing, 27 April 2016	Premier Li Keqiang vows to advance political and security cooperation with Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Political, Law, and Security Affairs Luhut Panjaitan who attended the fifth deputy prime ministerial bilateral dialogue mechanism meeting the previous day. During the meeting, both sides agree to increase security cooperation in the fields of defense, anti-terrorism, law enforcement, drug control, and the Internet. ⁷⁰
Jakarta, August 2018	The seventh iteration of the Indonesia-China defense industry cooperation meeting is attended by officials and representatives from defense-sector companies from both sides. The meeting discusses both countries' military capacity, policies, equipment, products, and opportunities for further collaboration. ⁷¹
Jakarta, 27 November 2019	Signing of Memorandum of Understanding between the National Resilience Institute of the Republic of Indonesia and the China Institute for International Strategic Studies on Cooperation in Strategic Research and Academic Exchange in the Areas of Defence and Security.
12 May 2020	Chinese State Councilor and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe has phone meeting with Indonesian Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto on COVID-19. Wei calls for efforts to continue high-level communications and strengthen cooperation in all fields between the two armed forces. Prabowo in return expresses his gratitude to the Chinese military for its support and assistance. ⁷²
Simalungun, 12 January 2021	Signing of Memorandum of Understanding between the National Cyber and Crypto Agency of the Republic of Indonesia and the Cyberspace Administration of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation in Developing Cyber Security Capacity and Technology.

CYBERSECURITY AND TECHNOLOGY

In 2017, Jokowi established the *Badan Siber dan Sekuriti Negara* (BSSN) or the [National Cyber and Crypto Agency](#). The BSSN functions under the authority of, and is directly responsible to, the President. Its function is in conjunction with the National Crypto Agency and The Directorate of Information Security, the Directorate General of Informatics Applications, Ministry of Communication and Information.

The BSSN now handles all the duties and functions in the field of encryption at the National Crypto Agency, as well as information security, securing the use of Internet protocol-based telecommunications networks, and security of the existing telecommunications network and infrastructure at the Ministry of Communication and Informatics.

In January 2021, the Indonesian National Cyber and Crypto Agency and the Cybersecurity Administration of China concluded a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Developing Cyber Security Capacity and Technology.

The cooperation encourages the exchange of information on regulatory systems related to spatial governance of cyberspace, which can include exchanges in terms of laws, regulations, and management policies related to cyberspace, as well as the sharing of views, experiences, lessons learned, best practices on protection of vital information infrastructure, and cyberthreat response.

The Memorandum also establishes and facilitates dialogue on cybersecurity between multiple stakeholders, coordinate visits of experts, and capacity building.

Huawei and ZTE's grip on Indonesia's telecoms

These days, among the significant players in the Indonesian carrier equipment and corporate equipment markets are two Chinese companies: Huawei and ZTE.

Chinese Banks behind Huawei and ZTE's success in Indonesia

Coupled with the Chinese banks' incentives, Huawei and ZTE's ability to charm Indonesian telecom businesses has become unrivalled. Between 2005 and 2007, Chinese state-owned banks—both policy and commercial banks—promised to give at least US\$600 million in export buyer's credits to Indonesian businesses, which may have aided Indonesian telecom firms in acquiring Huawei and ZTE goods. In August 2010, the largest state-owned bank in China, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, inked an export buyer's credit arrangement with Huawei's Indonesian clients to finance Huawei product imports. In November 2017, PT Global Mediacom received a loan from the China Development Fund -- the investment arm of China Development Bank, one of Beijing's two primary lenders -- to buy ZTE products.

Source: CDB Provides \$29.75 Million Buyer's Credit Loan for ZTE Fiber-to-the-Home (FTTH) Network Project," [AidData](#)

Huawei established its first collaboration in Indonesia in June 2003.⁷³ Under a US\$10-million deal, Huawei would provide PT Excelcomindo Pratama (now XL) with the GSM (Global System for Mobile) hardware required to enlarge the operator's network in Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi. ZTE secured its first operation in Indonesia by assisting Telkom Indonesia with the construction of a US\$47.6-million CDMA (Code Division Multiple Access) network and digital loop carrier network connecting Jakarta and surrounding areas.⁷⁴

Following these accomplishments, Huawei and ZTE received a steady stream of significant Indonesian contracts to build the country's telecoms infrastructure and mobile network, sometimes in collaboration with other foreign ICT companies.

Another Huawei subsidiary, Huawei Marine, was able to secure a number of significant contracts starting in 2009 to help the construction of undersea cable networks that increased Internet penetration and connection in northwest Indonesia.⁷⁵

ZTE also established itself as a significant equipment provider to Indonesian telecoms for 3G and 4G/LTE network development.⁷⁶ In addition, Huawei and ZTE signed agreements with significant Indonesian telecom carriers to build the nation's 5G mobile network even as these firms experienced challenges doing the same in many developed nations.⁷⁷

But why are Indonesians, their government, and businesses in the country so fond of Huawei and ZTE?

One important factor that enabled Huawei and ZTE to beat their competitors is that both invested in training and offered more technical support, including maintenance services. The Indonesian government also treasured their dedication to help it meet its human-resource needs.

When Huawei received its first contract in Indonesia, Gerald F. Rossi, president and director of Excelcom (now XL Axiata, Indonesia's second largest mobile telecom firm), noted Huawei's "commitment to a high degree of service support and local training." This commitment has been intensified throughout Huawei and ZTE's presence in Indonesia.

In 2021, Huawei Indonesia CEO Jacky Chen said that the firm wanted to develop at least 100,000 Indonesian digital talents within five years through collaborative programs with various stakeholders. Together with the government, higher education, industry, and the community, Huawei Indonesia organized various programs, among them Huawei ICT Academy, Huawei ICT Competition, Huawei Seeds for the Future, and TechDay, as well as training programs in the fields of 5G, Cloud, AI, and cybersecurity – all under the 'I Do' commitment umbrella. Huawei Indonesia Vice President and Board Director Ken Qi would later say, "In just 14 months until the end of 2021, Huawei Indonesia managed to train more than 52,000 digital talents, more than half of the five-year target."⁷⁸

Huawei and ZTE also became the Indonesian government's partner in its effort to digitalize the economy and state processes and services.

Huawei, with Indonesian telcos, provides Indonesian local governments digital services, public- safety infrastructure, cybersecurity, and technical capacity building through a Smart City Program. In Makassar, Indonesia's largest urban hub in its eastern region, ZTE provided similar services for communications and crisis response of emergency workers.⁷⁹

Indonesian government agencies have heaped praise on the Chinese firms, as well as expressed appreciation for their commitment. Huawei CEO Jacky Chen was even present at the start of a training workshop for Indonesia's Presidential Staff members. According to Presidential Chief of Staff (Purn) Moeldoko, this type of training is expected to "accelerate the achievement of the government's target of realizing nine million digital human resources in Indonesia in 2030 and support the vision of Indonesia Gold in 2045."⁸⁰

At a training seminar on 5G and cybersecurity with Huawei, the main secretary of the Indonesian National Cyber and Crypto Agency expressed his gratitude for the Chinese company's consistent support for the holding of educational activities aimed at building awareness and a culture of cybersecurity. He added, "Cybersecurity is a critical factor in optimizing the utilization of 5G technology in the future. We really appreciate Huawei's continued commitment and contribution to increasing knowledge ecosystem regarding the potential and the risks that must be anticipated from the presence of the latest technologies."⁸¹

Examples of Training and Cooperation with Indonesian Government Institutions

CHINESE FIRM	DATE	INDONESIAN STATE AGENCY	DETAILS OF COOPERATION
Huawei	2015	Ministry of Communication and Information	Memorandum of Understanding between Indonesian MoCI and Huawei <i>on development of innovation centers including human resources training, etc.</i> ⁸²
Huawei	January 2019	Indonesian National Cyber and Crypto Agency	Huawei signs an MoU to help develop the Indonesian National Cyber and Crypto Agency's human capital.
Huawei	September 2020	Agency for the Assessment and Application of Technology (<i>Badan Pengkajian dan Penerapan Teknologi, BPPT</i>)	Online training for 400 civil officers of BPPT on AI, cloud computing, 5G, and big data. ⁸³

Examples of Training and Cooperation with Indonesian Government Institutions

CHINESE FIRM	DATE	INDONESIAN STATE AGENCY	DETAILS OF COOPERATION
Huawei	2021	Indonesian National Cyber and Crypto Agency	Renewal of MoU to develop Indonesian National Cyber and Crypto Agency's human capital. ⁸⁴
Huawei	October 2021	Indonesian National Cyber and Crypto Agency and the Cybersecurity Administration of China	" Technical transfer and expert sharing on 5G Security Standard Training ," 5G Security Training and NESAS Best Practice Discussion (Huawei ASEAN Academy) with invited representatives of BSSN related to 5G development strategies, policy making, etc. ⁸⁵
Huawei Indonesia		Ministry of Manpower	Training for 140 vocational school teachers on wireless installation in Huawei ASEAN Academy Engineering Institute. ⁸⁶
Huawei	January 2022	The National Research and Innovation Agency	Huawei provides its AI equipment alongside a four-day technical training for the Agency's staff to help Indonesia's AI National Strategy . ⁸⁷
Huawei	May 2022	Ministry of Communication and Information	5G technology training for beginners, with 1,000 participants in cooperation with Digital-ent and eight Indonesian universities , including Telkom University, Institut Teknologi Bandung, and Universitas Islam Indonesia. ⁸⁸
Huawei	October 2022	Presidential Staff Office	" DILAN: Digital Melayani (Serving Digitally) ," ICT training for 200 participants; topics include digital leadership, technology development, challenges and opportunities in digital tech. ⁸⁹
Huawei	November 2022	Ministry of Communication and Information	MoU renewal, with theme of signing ceremony " Forging ahead Indonesia's Digital Transformation ." ⁹⁰

Examples of Huawei and ZTE's ICT Training for University Students

CHINESE FIRM	DATE	PLEDGE DETAILS
Huawei	March 2017	Huawei launches SmartGen, an ICT training program for students of seven top Indonesian universities. ⁹¹
Huawei	October 2020	Huawei cooperates with 33 Indonesian universities in Digital Talent Training that aims to increase ICT capacities for universities' students and staffs. The series of training covers themes such as Big Data Application Best Practice and Sharing, BSSN-Huawei Cyber Scout Hunt, and Cybersecurity for IoT. ⁹²
Huawei	October 2020	Asia Pacific Atlas Edge Computing Indonesia eBootcamp 2020, with representatives of 14 university rectors across Indonesia, including universities rector/bureaucrats. ⁹³
Huawei	December 2022	Universitas Gadjah Mada and Huawei cooperation to prepare "digital talents." ⁹⁴

Huawei ASEAN Academy Engineering Indonesia is situated in a two-hectare area in Jakarta. It is said to be the largest and most comprehensive training and certification center in ICT among other Huawei academies in the [Asia Pacific](#).

Jacky Chen, CEO of Huawei Indonesia and President of the Huawei ASEAN Academy Engineering Institute Indonesia, has emphasized Huawei's strong commitment to support Indonesia's vision of being among the world's top five digital economic powers by 2045.

The institute operates two colleges that offer a wide range of ICT technical training and certification for engineers, telecommunication providers, operators, and entrepreneurs, and students and academics. The Engineering College aims to increase the digital and ICT capacities of vocational students and personnel of subcontractor companies.



Image Source: [Uzone.id](#) *Blusukan ke Huawei Asean Academy dan Teknologi BTS Milik Huawei*

BEIJING'S CULTURAL OFFENSIVE

Content-sharing deals with government and private media agencies. Exchange visits for journalists, academics, and students. Cultural promotion activities through Confusion Centers, twitplomacy, and all other legacy or social-media platforms. In its sustained and massive effort to promote and push its narrative, programs, and policies in Indonesia, China has nearly done it all and is now reaping many rewards.

Chinese state media, for instance, have a limited direct presence in Indonesia. But their content and messages now resonate with greater traction through their continued expansion of partnerships with Indonesian media. Beijing has also forged cooperation with prominent Muslim organizations Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, whose representatives have been invited to visit Xinjiang – home of the Muslim Uyghurs -- together with journalists. These partnerships have amplified China's narratives across bigger and more diverse Indonesian audiences.

Today the state-owned China International Television Corporation has set up the Hi Indo! Channel, along with a branch office in Indonesia.⁹⁵ The Chinese state media outlet Xinhua meanwhile has expanded both its physical and digital presence in the Indonesian media landscape. Xinhua established its Indonesian bureau in Jakarta in 2021.⁹⁶ The bureau's Twitter account (@XHIndonesia) has now drawn over 63,000 followers. Aside from promoting China's tourism, XHIndonesia often shares Bahasa translations of [Xi Jinping's speeches](#), along with China's narratives, such as [the mainland's unification](#) with Taiwan, and BRI's benefits to Indonesia.⁹⁷

Partnership agreements between China-owned media and local news agencies have flourished in recent years. Since December 2019, China Radio International (CRI) has been broadcasting in Bahasa Indonesia on the Elshinta News while Talk FM station in Jakarta,⁹⁸ one of the better known radio stations in the nation, has been the first to broadcast news in Mandarin.

[Elshinta Radio](#) also airs the Indonesian-language China Radio International (CRI) program on #ElshintaEdisiPagi at 05.00-05.30 WIB and #ElshintaEdisiSore at 20.30-21.00 WIB.⁹⁹ Over the course of years, Elshinta radio has become China's [valuable media partner](#) in Indonesia – from its journalists attending the ASEAN Media Partners Forum by China Media Group, to circulating news about Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party.¹⁰⁰

CRI's Indonesian Service has a Facebook page in Bahasa Indonesia as well, with 185,000 followers with user engagements.¹⁰¹

Other notable Chinese-Indonesian media tie-ups include those of Xinhua and *China Daily* with [Antara news agency](#) and Metro TV – both popular and pro-government media net-

works – that have resulting in published positive narratives on China.¹⁰² Metro TV is owned by business tycoon Surya Paloh, who is also a leader of the National Democrat Party, while Antara is a state-owned media enterprise.¹⁰³

To date, Media Indonesia, which has the same owners as Metro TV, has re-published content from Xinhua. Metro TV offers program from CGTN, Beijing’s state-run English language news channel. In June 2021, Metro TV aired an exclusive interview with former Chinese Ambassador Xiao Qian.

Part of the Antara-Xinhua agreement meanwhile is to translate Chinese-language news into Bahasa Indonesia and tailor Xinhua’s content to appeal to Indonesians. To attract more readers, Antara offered a two-month free trial of its Chinese content.¹⁰⁴ In addition, Antara correspondents in Beijing frequently write pieces that amplify Beijing’s narrative on certain topics, such as Xinjiang’s ‘vocational camps’ and freedom of religion. A [two-part](#) piece in April 2021 talked about how Muslims in China spent the holidays, claiming first-hand credibility.¹⁰⁵

According to Indonesian journalist Muhammad Zulfikar, Antara’s reporting on China makes up a sizable amount of the China news coverage in Indonesia and is reproduced by other publications throughout Indonesia, including [Elshinta news’ website](#).¹⁰⁶

In an interview, Zulfikar also noted another possible content-sharing agreement by Xinhua with *Jakarta Post*, a prominent and widely read English-language news outlet. *Jakarta Post* republishes content from [China Daily](#), the CCP Publicity Department-owned media outlet.¹⁰⁷

Both *Jakarta Post* and *China Daily* are members of the [Asia News Network](#), a regional content-sharing alliance headquartered in Singapore.¹⁰⁸ The *Jakarta Post* also frequently publishes writings by [Chinese ambassadors](#).¹⁰⁹

JUNKETS FOR JOURNALISTS

The Chinese government has made sure that its narratives are spread far and wide even in the localities of Indonesia by inviting journalists to visit China.

In 2019, the Indonesian Journalists Association (*Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia, PWI*) attended the Belt Road Initiative Journalists Forum organized by CCP-affiliated All-China Journalist Association (ACJA).

At the BRI Journalists Forum, the Indonesian journalist organizations sit as members of the *presidia*, alongside their colleagues from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Argentina, and Nigeria, until 2024.¹¹⁰

In 2018, PWI and ACJA signed a deal to reward Indonesian journalists writing on the BRI,¹¹¹ further incentivizing local media practitioners to write pro-BRI pieces and effectively act as channels of Beijing propaganda.

Even prior to the 2019 conference, Indonesian journalists had been [regularly attending](#) the forum.¹¹² These forums seem to aim to propagate China's investments in the localities, as seen in the mix of journalists and media outlets that publish reports of the event in Indonesian.

Examples of Local Coverage of Indonesian Journalist Exchange Programs to China

TITLE OF REPORT	MEDIA AGENCY	CONTENT/NARRATIVES
Itikad Baik Dasar Kerjasama Wartawan Indonesia - China (Good Faith in Indonesia-China Journalist Cooperation) ¹¹³ (2018)	Tribun News , National	Indonesian journalist joins in Belt and Road Journalists Forum and reports on advantages of BRI to Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum.
Catatan Wartawan Senior Radar Lombok, H Sukisman Azy Berjunjung ke China "70 Tahun Menderita, Warga Beijing Kini Makmur dan Kaya" ¹¹⁴ (Radar Lombok's Senior Journalist Notes on Visit to China, "70 Years of Suffering, Beijing Residents are Now Prosperous and Rich," 2019)	Radar Lombok , West Nusa Tenggara (Eastern Indonesia)	China's citizens, especially Beijing, live prosperously, thanks to the Chinese government's breakthrough and its desire to progress.
PWI Chairman Attends 2019 'Belt and Road Initiative' Journalist Forum in Beijing (2019) ¹¹⁵	Klik Papua, Papua (Easternmost Indonesia)	The forum advances the principles of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusivity, shared learning, and mutual benefits.
Belt and Road Initiative Journalist Conference: On Duty, Journalist Must Have Good Faith (trans.) ¹¹⁶	Jurnal Sumbar , West Sumatra	Benefits of good faith in conducting activities of the forum, e.g., joint coverage, journalism training, etc. Agreement to reward journalists who produce good journalistic work in BRI and GMF.
Belt and Road Journalist Forum, Teguh: Sharing Mutual Interests (trans.) (2017) ¹¹⁷	Tangerang Online , Banten Province (Java)	Mutual benefits of the forum, BRI, and GMF.
All China Journalist Association Welcomes Participants of BRI Forum (trans.) (2018) ¹¹⁸	Rmol.Bengkulu , Bengkulu (Sumatra, Western part of Indonesia)	Building understanding of the countries through the forum.

China has also been keen to seek help from the media of the world's largest Muslim-population country to advance its narrative on Xinjiang province. One way it has done this is to invite Indonesian journalists from time to time to visit the troubled province and give them guided tours of sites that have been considered controversial. Not surprisingly, academic Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat in an interview observed that upon returning to Indonesia, journalists on such state-sponsored junkets often publish opinion pieces that had only positive views about the place they visited.

In 2019, China invited 11 journalists from various news organizations in Indonesia and Malaysia. Among them were Nugroho Fery Yudho (senior editor of major national newspaper *Kompas*) and Zulfiany Lubis (chief editor of *idntimes.com*, digital news outlets targeting young Indonesians). Both later wrote pieces commending China's effort to counter extremism, separatism, and terrorism, and highlighted the "vocational camps" that they visited. Nugroho noted that he did not see any evidence of people being locked up as reported by other media.

After a similar trip to China in June 2019, one of the selected top journalists from *Radar Lombok*, a regional paper covering the Muslim-majority Lombok province, produced an article claiming that international media had spread incorrect information about China and rejected claims that China is a violent and oppressive country.¹¹⁹

Narasi TV, a digital-media channel, conducted an investigation on these trips for its YouTube channel series *Buka Data*. Using [satellite images](#), Narasi TV mapped the locations visited by the journalists and compared these with the supposedly "real" locations of the concentration camps. When presented with the data in an interview with Narasi TV, Zulfiany asserted that she "still could not say that there was a concentration camp because that was not what she saw."¹²⁰

Disinformation

"While Chinese state-affiliated actors in Indonesia have openly promoted falsehoods including the denial of the persecution of Uyghurs and other Muslim groups in Xinjiang, there is scant evidence of CCP-linked disinformation campaigns targeting Indonesian audiences."

Source: BC Han and Zulfikar Rachamat, [Freedom House: Beijing's Media Influence – Indonesia](#), see also [Chinese Embassy Objects Indonesian Media Coverage on Uyghur Issue in Xinjiang \(Indonesian\)](#)



CENSORSHIP, CONTROL OF INFORMATION

For sure, though, Beijing's efforts to push its version of what was going on in China were directed not only toward Indonesians and other outsiders. Indeed, China also tried to make sure that its own citizens would not hear anything negative about their government and leaders.

From 2018 to mid-2020, the Chinese Internet corporation ByteDance restricted information on its Indonesian news aggregation app that it believed to be disparaging of the Chinese government. According to an August 2020 Reuters report quoting unnamed sources, a team from ByteDance's Beijing headquarters instructed local moderators to remove items from the Baca Berita (BaBe) app that they deemed to be "negative" about Chinese authorities. The Reuters report, however, noted that BaBe disagreed with what the sources said, stating that it modifies content in accordance with its community guidelines and Indonesian local regulations.¹²¹

• An Indonesian Great Firewall? •

Perhaps used to the slow ways of government, Indonesians were caught by surprise in July 2022, when the Ministry of Communication and Information suddenly moved to finalize Indonesia's National Domain Name System (DNS Bersama). In [November 2020](#), MoCI had new licensing regulation rules that among other things required tech firms to register by 20 July 2022 and allows authorities to access platform user data. The rules also let authorities take down content seen as unlawful – or that "disturbs public order" – within 24 hours.

Within days after the deadline passed, the Ministry [blocked](#) electronic service providers such as PayPal and Yahoo, which failed to register with it. Google and Meta made the deadline, but waited until the last minute to register.

In 2021, the non-profit international media outfit Rest of World reported that China had blocked a number of Indonesian news sites. Among these was *Jawa Pos*, which was blocked in areas such as Beijing, Shenzhen, Yunnan, and Mongolia, while remaining accessible in Hong Kong and Macau. This was confirmed by *Jawa Pos* Editor in Chief Dhimas Ginanjar to Kompas.com. He also gave a statement to Rest of World, saying he could not understand why China would block the news portal. He added, "It's strange that the Chinese embassy actively invites us to press conferences or sends them updates. Our last communication with the embassy was last week."¹²²

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY (TWITPLOMACY)

Ironically, the Chinese embassy in Indonesia was itself slow to employ digital tactics. Up until he left his post in Jakarta, Xiao Qian, who was the Chinese ambassador to Indonesia

from December 2017 to November 2021, did not have a notable social-media presence. It took his successor, [Lu Kang](#), to open a Twitter account in April 2022¹²³ – the first Chinese envoy in Indonesia to become a Twitplomat.¹²⁴ By August 2022, or in a span of just four months, Lu already had 21,000 followers.

Like many other ambassadors, Lu Kang seems to be using his platform to promote his [activities](#).¹²⁵ In an apparent acknowledgment of the importance of amassing local supporters, Lu Kang has also tweeted in [Bahasa Indonesia](#).¹²⁶

By and large, however, Lu has used his Twitter account to highlight the positive progress in China-Indonesia relations -- in Chinese, English, and Bahasa Indonesia – projecting sensitivity to the growing local negative reaction to China’s presence in the country.

He frequently quote-tweets Xinhua reports to promote the progress of BRI. In one of his tweets in May 2022, he commented on a tweet by Xinhua that promoted BRI’s benefits to Indonesia’s development, saying that “China always promotes the peaceful development and peaceful cooperation between the countries.”

Ambassador Lu also uses his platform to [counter](#) U.S. narratives about China. For instance, when the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta (@usemabssykt) posted a series of infographics on South China disputes that described China’s unlawful claim of the Nine-Dash line and violations of the UNCLOS, Lu ran these tweets:

“The United States is talking about the Convention again. But it still refuses to tell everyone: Why is the United States still unwilling to ratify the Convention?” (trans.) and

“Countries in the region have been developing friendly relations in their own way for decades, managing differences and focusing on development cooperation. However, the United States continues to create tension in the region, stir up conflicts and engage in group confrontation. Can the United States respect the interests and wishes of the people in this region? Never feel that you know the region better than the people of the region.”¹²⁷

He has also “pinned” his own tweets, including one in which he shared an exclusive interview with him by Medcom.Id, an Indonesian state-owned digital news media, that had him commenting on international order and UN Charter:

“Some people talk a lot about ‘rules-based international order.’ But when asked whether the ‘rules’ in their mind are principles and purposes of the UN Charter, they never give you a YES. So ‘rules’ by their own definition?” (trans.)

Industrialization of Education

In October 2021, the Indonesia Embassy in Beijing facilitated the establishment of the Indonesia-China Industry-University Research Alliance. About 150 Chinese universities reportedly expressed willingness to cooperate with Indonesian universities through the alliance. *“This alliance is a breakthrough for the two countries to **synchronize** the industrial sector with higher education.”*



EDUCATION, CULTURE, MUSLIM DIPLOMACY

But China had more ‘honey’ strategies to employ aside from those using mass and social media. This was clear enough in [The “Vision and Actions Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,”](#) the BRI’s main strategy document, which emphasized ‘cultural exchange’ as a vital part of the realization of the initiative.¹²⁸

Accordingly, the 2018 MoU on Jointly Promoting Cooperation within the Framework of the Global Maritime Fulcrum Vision and the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Maritime Silk Road Initiative, socio-cultural cooperation was intended to [“consolidate the base of public opinions supporting bilateral cooperation.”](#)¹²⁹

Read the MoU in part: “In order to enhance people-to-people bond, the Participants will promote people-to-people exchanges, further develop the sister cities network and conclude cooperation on education, culture, health, tourism and public welfare so as **to consolidate the base of public opinions supporting bilateral cooperation.** The two Participants will enhance exchange and cooperation between their local governments, media, think tanks, and the youths, and continue **to promote the development cooperation related to public welfare.**”

China has pushed cultural and educational cooperation memorandums after the signing of project/loans.¹³⁰ Yet while BRI-promotion efforts increased in 2016, China’s offensives on the education front went full swing only in 2019.¹³¹

In [2017](#), it was reported that there were 14,000 Indonesian students in China.¹³² By 2020, that figure had become 15,780, a supposed increase of 1,420 students from 2019. Conversely, there were approximately 720 Chinese students studying in Indonesia in 2020.

In addition, numerous exchange and training programs for [teachers and school principals](#) were held,¹³³ and Mandarin-education assistance from China through [Smart Classroom aid](#)¹³⁴ have also been conducted in recent years.

There is an ongoing education tit-for-tat, however. The Indonesian Embassy in Beijing has started Bahasa Indonesia classes in 19 Chinese universities, said Yaya Sutarya, Attache for Education and Culture, Research, and Technology. On parallel track, the Indonesian government opened the Indonesian Research Center (IRC) in 15 universities in China.¹³⁵

AGREEMENT	DATE/LOCATION
Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education of the Republic of Indonesia and the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China on Higher Education Cooperation ¹³⁶	Guiyang, 1 August 2016
Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia and the Education Bureau of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China on Cooperation in the Field of Education	Jakarta, 16 December 2015
Plan of Action on Science, Technology, and Innovation Cooperation between the Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education of the Republic of Indonesia and the Ministry of Science and Technology of the People’s Republic of China (2018-2020)	Surakarta, 28 November 2017

CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES ALL OVER

While Indonesia has made efforts to have itself known among China’s studentry and academe, China has decidedly made greater inroads in propagating its culture and – perhaps more importantly – its viewpoints among Indonesians through its so-called ‘Confucius Institutes.’ After all, as academics Rika Theo and Maggi W.H. Leung put it, China’s Confucius Institution “embodies the ‘Going Out’ state strategy that promotes the global spread of Chinese capital, ideas, culture, and people.”¹³⁷

The Chinese government finances Confucius Institutes primarily through grants.¹³⁸ But getting these Institutes established in Indonesia has not been easy. In Indonesia, the term ‘Confucius’ carries significant political and historical baggage. Confucianism was first recognized in 1965 and remained so until the Soeharto regime’s Ministry of Home Affairs prohibited Indonesian citizens from listing Confucianism in the religion column of their national identity card.

The ideology would be recognized officially once more only after the fall of Soeharto.¹³⁹ Related prohibitions and restrictions on Chinese Indonesians would also be repealed gradually under the administration of Abdurrahman Wahid. Even years later, however, ‘Confucianism’ and other related terms still made many Indonesians uneasy.

According to the head of the Indonesian Coordinating Board for Mandarin Language Education (Badan Koordinasi Pendidikan Bahasa Mandarin or BKPBM) the Jakarta Chinese Language Teaching Center (BTIP), Maranatha Christian University, and Malang State University had expressed the idea of establishing Confucius Institutes in their respective campuses as early as 2004. But their plans were deferred due to political considerations raised by the Ministry of Education.¹⁴⁰

By 2007, however, Indonesia had its [first Confucius Institute](#), when the Jakarta BTIP Confucius (or Kongzi) Institute was inaugurated. The institute was co-founded by Bina Terampil Insan Persada (Skilled Development or Persada Individuals, BTIP) under the authorization of the Office of Chinese Language Council International or Hanban.¹⁴¹

Similar institutes were supposed to be established at Maranatha Christian University and Malang State University at the same time as Jakarta BTIP Kongzi Institute. But the government issued an order to suspend the launches the day before the scheduled launching.¹⁴² In the case of Maranatha, contrasting perspectives among campus bureaucrats on collaborating with China inhibited the establishment of a Confucius Institute, aside from the external pressure from the government.

• ***The more, the merrier*** •

In June 2022, the Indonesian Embassy in China and China’s Center for Language and Cooperation announced six more PBMs and centers for innovation to be established in Indonesia. This time around, the six educational institutions will be Universitas Gajah Mada (UGM), Universitas Padjajaran (Unpad), Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta (UNY), London School of Public Relations (LSPR), and Universitas Ciputra dan Universitas Pancasila.

Source: [Indonesian Ministry of Education](#)

Maranatha’s case stood out largely because it has a predominantly Chinese Indonesian population, which made having a Confucius Institute somewhat ‘suspect.’ A Chinese Culture lecturer had to fight her way through internal campus bureaucracy to convince her colleagues that establishing such an institute was a good move. Maranatha also actively approached China while waiting for the complicated government-to-government discussion and the internal procedure in each country.¹⁴³

There was, however, the matter of what to call the institute. Reportedly, Indonesia’s rejection of the name “Confucius Institute” was unacceptable to the Chinese government.

BKPBM mediated the difficult negotiations that took almost two years (2008-2009). It took a crucial meeting with BKPBM and the Indonesian Minister of Education before Hanban finally understood the Indonesians' position and left it to the Indonesian government to come up with an alternative name.

According to Theo and Leung, a socio-political discourse regarding "Confucianism" in Indonesia had occurred during the meeting. The scholars quoted an interviewee as recalling, "At the meeting, the minister explained that Confucianism is a religion in Indonesia. If we set up a Confucius Institute, what will happen when the Muslims also want to establish a Mohammad Institute, the Christians a Jesus Institute? The Hanban head finally understood and left the alternative name to the Indonesian side."¹⁴⁴

Further negotiations were mediated by BKPBM, which offered five alternative names, including Mandarin Language and Cultural Center (Pusat Bahasa dan Budaya Mandarin) and Tionghoa Language Center (Pusat Bahasa Tionghoa). Ultimately, phrases with 'Tionghoa' and 'Culture' were dropped and Confucius Institute in Indonesia became Pusat Bahasa Mandarin (Mandarin Language Center or PBM).¹⁴⁵

The establishment of Pusat Bahasa Mandarin can be largely attributed to the BKBPM and the Chinese-Indonesian community. BKPBM is a formal institution founded by Chinese-educated Chinese Indonesians that aims to act as bridge between the Indonesian and Chinese governments. In the case of the Confucius Institutes in Indonesia, BKPBM acted as the mediating agent that understood both interests and was able to smooth the differences between the Indonesian and Chinese governments.

List of Confucius Institutions in Indonesia

UNIVERSITY/INSTITUTION	YEAR	REGION	SCHEME	CHINESE UNIVERSITY PARTNER
Bina Terampil Insan Persada	2007	Jakarta Province (Western)	Grant	Hainan Normal University
University of Al Azhar	2011	Jakarta Province (Western)	Grant under the Agreement between the Ministry of Education and Hanban	Not specified
Malang State University	2011	East Java Province (Western)		Guangxi University
University of Tanjungpura	2011	West Kalimantan (Central)		Guangxi University
Maranatha Christian University	2011	West Java (Western)		Hebei University
Surabaya State University	2011	East Java (Western)		Not specified
Hassanuddin University	2011	South Sulawesi (Eastern)		Nanchang University

Source: AidData

A Helpful Hanban

In 2013 Hanban donated 300 books of history, geography, culture, economy, and social studies to Indonesia to implement China Hanban's (Chinese Corner) program in libraries of universities interested in the program. In the same year, Hanban dispatched 103 teacher volunteers to teach the Chinese language in primary and secondary schools all over Indonesia.

According to the agreement signed by the Chinese Education Sector and Indonesia, China Hanban dispatched volunteer Chinese teachers each year to help locals teach Chinese. In August 2015, Hainan Provincial Party Committee Secretary and his entourage visited Bali and Bali Hainan Dazhong Trilingual School. He donated CNY 100,000 on behalf of the Hainan Province.
Source: Aid Data

The Chinese diaspora in Indonesia also became instrumental in establishing a Confucius Institute in Makassar, South Sulawesi. A minority community in Makassar, the ethnic Chinese there traced their beginnings in the area to as early as the 15th century, but were still frequent victims of racial violence. They were targets during the [1965 clampdown on communism](#),¹⁴⁶ and their houses and shops were looted and burned of houses in 1997.¹⁴⁷ Reports on the alleged abuse of a domestic worker by her Chinese employer in 2006 also led to the destruction of ethnic Chinese property in the city.¹⁴⁸

Linkage with the Chinese-Indonesian community in Makassar who strategically used their diasporic relations with China and their financial resources to anticipate potential friction led to the successful setting up of the Pusat Bahasa Mandarin in Universitas Hasanuddin (Unhas).

To get a Pusat Bahasa Mandarin set up in Makassar, the city's Chinese Indonesians formed Zhenghe Foundation, which in turn relentlessly approached Universitas Hasanuddin for possible collaboration with China. In 2001, a joint delegation from Unhas and Zhenghe Foundation went to Xiamen University to discuss a potential collaboration. Xiamen University was chosen because some of the Chinese-Indonesian leaders had studied there and were still connected with it.

The visit resulted in an agreement to send teachers from Xiamen to teach Chinese at Unhas. The expenses, such as part of the salary and accommodation costs, were footed by Zhenghe Foundation. The Chinese-language course was given free to Unhas students for several years.

But Makassar still had no Confucius Institute. Over the course of years, a predominant Chinese-Indonesian figure in Makassar also began to write to the Chinese Embassy in Jakarta about the interest and importance of establishing one in Indonesia. Eventually, in 2010, Nanchang University made the proposal to establish a Confucius Institute in Universitas Hasanuddin. To accommodate more students, a new building with a more convenient location was built for the Pusat Bahasa Mandarin. The old building owned by the university received considerable funding from the Zhenghe Foundation for renovation purposes.¹⁴⁹

In June 2010, during the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Indonesia, the two sides signed the agreement to open six Confucius institutes in Indonesia.

By 26 November 2011, [all six institutes](#) had been inaugurated, with these universities participating in the endeavor: the University of Al Azhar Indonesia, Malang State University, University of Tanjungpura, Maranatha Christian University, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, and Hassanuddin University.

Confucius Institution Activities

To date, the CIs or PBMs are still going strong. In 2014 alone, PBM Al-Azhar hosted 51 cultural activities with 29,870 participants, including a series of “Confucius Institute Days” that according to *China News Daily* “were all popular among the local young people and other residents.”¹⁵⁰

Al-Azhar’s PBM also sealed cooperation agreements on Chinese-language classes with [major local television stations](#),¹⁵¹ and set up teaching sites in schools and government departments in Indonesia, including [the Indonesian National Police Headquarters](#),¹⁵² Soekarno-Hatta International Airport, and the Ministry of National Defense.

In 2022, Al-Azhar University received almost US\$16,000 for the next year from Hisense Fund of Confucius Institute (under the Indonesian branch of Chinese electronic manufacturer Hisense) for its PBM.¹⁵³

In Bandung, the Maranatha CI remains operational, although it differs somewhat from the other CIs in Indonesia that emphasize on-campus Chinese courses. Maranatha’s CI is more active in teaching Chinese in other universities and schools, as well as in private institutions and even in government settings. This is largely the result of its smooth relationships with numerous Chinese universities, which have also enabled it to act as a liaison for other Indonesian colleges looking to collaborate with China.¹⁵⁴

So far, however, it has been the Makassar PBM’s performance that has received special recognition in China. In 2016, it got

Nahdlatul Ulama

“China openly provide Nahdlatul Ulama facilities, cash assistance and convenience to NU members and sub-organizations; food assistance to Islamic boarding schools and orphanages under the auspices of NU through the Chinese Ambassador to Indonesia, assistance with transportation facilities such as ambulances, holding events and competitions related to China and linking them with Islam, providing large assistance with the convenience of scholarships for Nahdlatul Ulama members to study bachelors to PhD in China. They are also often invited directly to discuss with the Chinese Embassy in Indonesia.” - Yusuf Kurniawan, Indonesia Save Uyghur

Visit by Premier Wen Jiabao to Pusat Bahasa Mandarin Al-Azhar University: China's Friendly Gesture to Muslim

"I once read the Qur'an, the teachings in it tell us that the world needs peace and harmony.. (...) Coming to Indonesia, especially Al-Azhar, I feel that I have returned home" – Wen Jiabao's at Al-Azhar University

In April 2011, Premier Wen Jiabao visited PBM Al-Azhar University during an official trip to Indonesia. According to Al-Azhar, the visit was aimed at developing cooperation in Chinese Language and Chinese Culture, Indonesian Culture and Indonesian Language. In his speech, Wen cited Indonesia's diversity and tolerance. He also said that he was impressed with Islam, noting that upholding peace and mutual respect are among its teaching. As a country with the most followers of Islam, he said, Indonesia is an example of the importance of tolerance. Source: [Al-Azhar University](#) and [Viva.co.id](#)

the [Individual Performance Excellence Award](#) during the 11th Confucius Institute Conference in China. Hasanuddin University's rector said at the event, "In addition to carrying out activities on campus, (PBM) Universitas Hasanuddin also opened branches of similar programs at Athirah Universities, Makassar, Tomohon, North Sulawesi, and (next year) Udayana University."

The university continues to collaborate with Makassar's ethnic Chinese community, particularly with the Cheng Ho Foundation and Chinese Association, to hold various cultural activities. China is said to regularly send art and cultural representatives to take part in these activities.¹⁵⁵

Reaching out to Santris, Muslim Students

As Muslim conservatives gain louder voices in Indonesia, China has seen to it that its charm campaign would include not only the *ulamas* and mass Muslim organizations, but also the *santri*, or the students of Islam. Commented a local journalist in an interview: "This is mainly aimed to maintain China's positive image amongst Indonesian Muslims, while ensuring its policies in Xinjiang remains foreshadowed"¹⁵⁶

In 2019, the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with Ministry of Religious Affairs, sent 10 selected *santri* to China through "[Santri for World Peace, Goes to China](#)" program. According to the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, the 10 *santri* would "visit institutions and conduct meetings with several associations to have a direct interaction with China's situation that's developed in various areas while still maintaining its Eastern identity." The Indonesia Ambassador to China and Mongolia, Djauhari Oratmangun, said that the *santri* visits were "the momentum to spread peace and learn the civilization and various development in China."¹⁵⁷

An Antara piece based on Ministry of Foreign Affairs communications said that the *santri* visited the [state-led China Islamic Association](#) and had a dialogue with its Secretary General, Ma Zhongping, who discussed Beijing's efforts for Muslim students, teachers, and clergies through scholarships to the Middle East and other programs.¹⁵⁸

Also on the [agenda](#) were [dialogues](#) with Nuhie Muslim communities, All China Youth Federation, Pengurus Cabang Istimewa Nahdlatul Ulama in China, Lingkar Pengajian Beijing, and China's mega enterprises such as Xiaomi, Alibaba, Huawei, and JD.com.¹⁵⁹ Antara reported further that Xiaomi was willing to cooperate with *pesantren* (Muslim religious schools) to develop the [smart pesantren](#) concept that uses technology for education and daily life.¹⁶⁰

More recently, China has turned to courting *santri* with scholarships. The increased number of *santri* scholars has been enabled by the Chinese government's cooperation with Nahdlatul Ulama in setting up a scholarship program. Since 2018, Lembaga Perguruan Tinggi Pengurus Besar NU facilitated a [specialized scholarship pathway](#) for its members (Kader *Nahdliyin*) through the Chinese Government Scholarship.¹⁶¹ With the increased number of *santri* scholars came the establishment of the NU China chapter (Pengurus Cabang Istimewa Nahdlatul Ulama).

In February 2021, Pengurus Cabang Istimewa NU Tiongkok (PCINU China) was invited by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China to the Xinjiang Brief Forum with other 300 political party and organization leaders from 80 different countries. Representatives of Indonesian political parties Partai Amanat Nasional and Partai Kebangkitan Nasional were also at the forum. When asked to give recommendations regarding the Xinjiang issue, PCINU China suggested that the Communist Party involve Xinjiang Muslim leaders, through local Muslim associations, in policies and communications outside of China so that wider public could see Xinjiang in its *entirety*, and not only through the lens of the Western media.

Between 2019 and 2020, PCINU China was invited to numerous dialogue and forum such as the China-Indonesia Symposium on Islamic Culture in Quanzhou by the Fujian government with Huaqiao University, and the China-Indonesia People-to-People Exchange Development Forum Conference in Wuhan. In 2020, PCINU China organized five seminars and online discussions with the Indonesia-China relationship as the main topic. Among the events' invitees were the Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Culture, Spokesperson for the President of Indonesia, members of the House of Representatives, the Ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia to China, entrepreneurs, academics, and representatives of mass organizations. PCINU China has also published a book on Muslim students' experiences and perspectives in China called *Islam Indonesia and China: The Struggle of Indonesian Santri in China*.

In a 2021 opinion piece for an online Indonesian publication, [Ahmad Syaifuddin Zuhri](#), Viceroy Syuriyah PCINU Tiongkok, wrote that these efforts were meant to strengthen Islam, as well as act as one of the diplomacy bridges between the two countries, and enable people-to-people connection. A PhD in International Relations candidate at a university in Wuhan, Zuhri went on to emphasize how China's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and belief. Zuhri wrote as well about his positive experience as a Muslim in China, the developments of mosques and Muslim communities there, as well as the similarities

between Indonesian and Chinese Muslim *mazhab*. He also said, "For China, ideologies are internal matters of each country, (...) that's why we have to look at China today from the point of view of economics, and technological progress, apart from the global politics."¹⁶²

In 2019, at a Chinese Government Scholarship Coaching Clinic at Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama, Zuhri had [encouraged students](#) to apply for scholarships in China, emphasizing the opportunities that China's massive investment in Indonesia could give for employment in the future. He also talked about the protection of freedom of religion in China. According to a local media report, Zuhri had added that the misconception of China among Indonesians was due to the fact that people still see China under Mao Zedong and its Cultural Revolution (*Revolusi Kebudayaan*). The condition in fact changed after China shifted under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping through his economic reform and open-door policy, one of which is embracing different groups including the Chinese Muslim communities, Zuhri reportedly argued. He was also quoted as saying, "The construction of a place of worship also grew significantly. Unfortunately, there are still many who look at China as China before Deng Xiaoping."¹⁶³

In July 2021, Yaya Sutarya, the Education, Culture, Research and Technology Attache of the Indonesian Embassy in Beijing, offered through the Indonesian Embassy in Beijing a Muslim-education cooperation scheme to the Advisory Council of the Chinese Communist Party, Xinjiang Committee, Xu Hairong. According to Sutarya, Xinjiang Autonomous Region Government expressed interest. He added that the cooperation complemented the long-running investment and trade cooperation between Indonesia and China. This cooperation would initiate exchanges between Muslim students in Xinjiang and Indonesian *santri*, with scholarships for Xinjiang students to study in Indonesia.

Sutarya actually visited Xinjiang, during which he had Xinjiang Autonomous Region Spokesperson Ilijan Anayat accompany him to several cities such as Kashgar, Yili, and Urumqi. At a press conference later, Ilijan said that Indonesian communities could [objectively see Xinjiang](#) through the attache's visit.¹⁶⁴

REAPING THE BENEFITS: GETTING AWAY WITH ABUSE IN XINJIANG

In October 2022, the world was surprised when the most populous Muslim-majority nation was among 19 countries that [rejected](#) a motion at the United Nations calling for a debate on alleged rights abuses against Muslim Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in China's Xinjiang province.¹⁶⁵

But then in 2019, Indonesian [Presidential Chief of Staff Moeldoko](#) had told reporters that the government would not be poking its nose in another country's business, framing the

plight of the Uyghur as part of China's internal affairs. "Every country has the sovereign right to manage its own citizens, so the Indonesian government will not meddle in the internal affairs of China," Moeldoko said. "I think it is internationally accepted not to meddle in another country's affairs."¹⁶⁶

Moeldoko's statement is largely similar to how China handled the 1998 anti-ethnic Chinese riots in Indonesia.¹⁶⁷

Several other government statements would repeat this reasoning. In a statement explaining its decision to reject the draft resolution at the United Nations, Indonesia cited its belief that the approach would "not yield meaningful progress" because the motion "does not enjoy the consent and support of the concerned country."

"The Council should focus on creating a conducive environment that encourages countries to fulfill their human rights obligations," said [Indonesia's permanent representative to the UN](#) Febrina Ruddyard, at the conclusion of the vote at the UN headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. "The role of the international community, therefore, is to support national-led efforts to make concrete human rights improvement on the ground."

The Foreign Ministry's director for human rights also explained there was an understanding among Human Rights Council members representing the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Muslim world's governing body for cooperation, not to let the Council be used as a vehicle to promote "political rivalries."

"(When it came down to a vote) yesterday, supporting the initiative was not in line with our views," he said. "There was doubt in the sincerity of the discussion process."¹⁶⁸

Yusuf Kurniawan from Indonesia Save Uyghur has also noted that China has singled out NU for close engagement as it is the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia. NU is also a very vocal organization that talks

Investing for Support?

Besides Indonesia, a number of OIC member states such as Pakistan, Somalia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates also voted "No" to the proposal for a debate on Xinjiang. Among the 11 countries that abstained were India, Malaysia, and Ukraine.

"China had likely provided diplomacy to the countries present regarding China's economic relations and investment in that country," said Yusuf Kurniawan of the group Indonesia for Uyghur. "This is also influenced by Arab countries, where they are heavily scrutinized for many human-rights violations in their country, such as the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which has received international attention regarding freedom of the press and opinion in Saudi Arabia. This is not to mention the strengthening economic relations between Arab countries and China. Of course, they do not want this to backfire. ... (When) Turkey began to speak up against China's policy toward the Uyghur minority and be on the side of Western countries, China then attacked Turkey by raising the issue of Kurdish minority persecution."

about terrorism -- even though its statements are sometimes wrong and not quite objective. The Wall Street Journal has even alleged that China has manipulated NU and Muhammadiyah to ensure their silence on Xinjiang. An article published by Human Rights Watch on 31 Jan 2020, however, said that both organizations responded to the allegations by issuing a strongly worded statement on Xinjiang, calling on the Chinese government to “stop all violations of human rights especially against the Uyghur community, under whatever pretext.”

THE CCP AND INDONESIAN POLITICAL PARTIES

Nearly all the major national political parties of Indonesia has secured or sought cooperation with the Communist Party of China.

POLITICAL PARTIES	IDEOLOGY/ ALIGNMENT	PARLIAMENTARY ¹⁶⁹	TYPE OF COOPERATION
<i>Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan</i>	Nationalist/Secular	Majority, ruling party (22.26%)	Institutional cooperation through MoU
<i>Partai Golongan Karya</i>	Nationalist/Secular	Majority (14.78%)	Institutional cooperation through MoU
<i>Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya (Gerindra)</i>	Nationalist/Secular	Majority (opposition), 13.57%	Visits and meetings
<i>Partai Nasional Demokrat</i>	Nationalist/Secular	10.26%	Meetings and intention to establish cooperation
<i>Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa</i>	Islamist	10.09%	Institutional cooperation through MoU
<i>Partai Demokrat</i>	Nationalist/Secular	9.39%	Exchanges, meetings, and visits
<i>Partai Keadilan Sejahtera</i>	Islamist	8.70%	Visits and meetings
<i>Partai Amanat Nasional</i>	Islamist	7.65%	Visits and meetings
<i>Partai Persatuan Pembangunan</i>	Islamist	3.30%	Unknown, the Party denied CCP's claim that they have established cooperation

Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan PDIP (The Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle)

President Jokowi's party, PDIP.

June 2011	Cooperation with the CCP for resource enhancement. ¹⁷⁰
September 2012	The Communist Party of China visits PDIP secretariat for an exchange, PDIP intended to learn the CCP's grassroot cadres set-up and poverty eradication. A discussion " Peran Partai dalam Membangun Organisasi Akar Rumput dan Pengentasan Kemiskinan " (The Role of Parties in Building Grassroots Organizations and Poverty Alleviation) is held. Deputy Director General International Exchange Center of IDCPC Ah Yuejun says that the visit is intended to conduct comparative study on how to conduct regeneration and leadership education... ¹⁷¹
Beijing, 23 October 2013	The CCP invites PDI members for a learning exchange and the latter sends a delegation of 15, led by Eva Kusuma Sundari. According to Eva, her delegation is the third batch of PDIP members to participate in the learning exchange with the Communist Party. In Beijing, they attend workshops with experts and officers of the Party School of the CCP, such as "Grassroots Cadres Competitive Selection and Training," "The Experiences on Building Close Party-Masses Relationship," and " Sharing Experiences on Strengthening and Innovating of Social Administration. " ¹⁷²
Beijing, 12-15 October 2015	Megawati Soekarnoputri embarks on a series of visits to Beijing, including an honorary visit to President Xi Jinping, attending a ceremony at Center for China-Indonesia Cooperation ' Rumah Soekarno ' in Qianhai, Shenzhen and a series of meetings with leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, and speaking at the Political Leadership: New Consensus for Political Party at the International Conference of Asian Political Parties (ICAPP) ¹⁷³

Partai Demokrat (The Democrat Party)

Partai Demokrat signed a Memorandum of Understanding for [institutional partnership](#) with the CCP in 2011 at the Party's secretariat in Jakarta. The CCP delegation, led by CCP Political Bureau Chief Li Yan Chau was welcomed by Partai Demokrat General Chair Anas Urbaningrum, Secretary General Edhie Baskoro Yudhoyono, and other party elites. ¹⁷⁴

Partai Gerindra/Gerakan Indonesia Raya (The Gerindra Party/Great Indonesia Movement)

In 2019, CCP International Relations Head Song Tao led a delegation to visit Gerindra Chairman Prabowo at the latter's [residence](#) in South Jakarta. ¹⁷⁵

Partai Golongan Karya 'Golkar' (The Party of Functional Group)

In 2014, then Golkar Chairman Aburizal Bakrie, along with Vice Chairmen Theo L Sambuga and Lalu Mara Satriawangsa, received an honorary visit from CCP Head of the Department of Foreign Affairs Wang Jiauri, accompanied by Chinese Ambassador to Indonesia HE Xie Fieng, and a nine-member CCP delegation. They discussed the political situation in their respective countries. At the time, Golkar was one of the key parties in the Indonesian parliament.

In a report by *Merdeka*, Bakrie detailed *Golkar cooperation* with CCP through the years.¹⁷⁶

2008	Signing of Memorandum of Understanding, party's regeneration and organizational matters
Beijing, April 2011	Elites of Golkar conduct series of visit and meetings with the CCP in Beijing upon CCP invitation to detail parties' cooperation
Denpasar, October 2011	Regional Representative of Golkar in Bali Province receives honorary visit of the CCP's Secretary General of the Gansu Province in Golkar Bali Denpasar Office.
16 September 2014	Signing of cooperation between the foreign commission and the trade commission of the Chinese parliament. During the meeting facilitated at Bakrie Tower, Aburizal Bakrie also discusses the political situation in Indonesia after the 2014 election and Golkar's position in the parliament.

Source: [Merdeka](#)

Partai Nasional Demokrat (The National Democratic Party)

In 2014, Partai Nasional Demokrat Chairman Surya Paloh paid a visit to CCP headquarters in Beijing and met with Zhang Xuyi (CCP Deputy Director General of the Department of Foreign Affairs Central Commission), who expressed CCP's interest to establish cooperation with Paloh's party.

According to Zhang, the main objectives in establishing party-to-party cooperation would be to strengthen the longstanding and increasing cooperation between Indonesia and China, as well as to exchange ideas and experiences on the formation of political parties, *especially to support the power of government*. Zhang later mentioned that the CCP has cooperated with Indonesian five political parties, i.e., PDIP, Golongan Karya, Partai Demokrat, Partai Persatuan Pembangunan dan Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya (Gerindra).¹⁷⁷

Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (The Prosperous Justice Party)

In 2013, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) admitted its [good relations](#) with the CCP, claiming that each supported the other's programs. PKS International Relations Head Taufik Ramlan stated that both parties had sent delegations to Indonesia and China to support each other's agendas.¹⁷⁸

Partai Amanat Nasional (The National Mandate Party) – Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (The Nation Awakening Party)

In February 2021, invited by CCP Central Committee, the National Mandate Party and Nation Awakening Party attended the Xinjiang Brief Forum. The Chinese government invited PAN, PKB, and PKS to visit [Hui Muslim Ethnic Autonomous Region](#) in Ningxia (in relation to reports of discrimination toward Muslims in Xinjiang).¹⁷⁹

Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (The Unity Development Party)

Partai Persatuan Pembangunan is one party that has denied Chinese claims of cooperating with it. In 2014, the Chinese ambassador visited Suharso Monoarfa (then- Minister of PPN/Kepala Bappenas) in his [official residence](#) to talk about Indonesia-China bilateral cooperation and investment development. The CCP's representative who accompanied the Chinese Ambassador did express her intention to establish a cooperation between CCP and PPP, but Suharso Monoarfa stated that as PPP is an Islam-based party, such cooperation will be difficult. There were never any talks about cooperation after that, PPP Secretary General Arwani Thomafi has asserted.¹⁸⁰

COVID-19 DIPLOMACY AND BEYOND

By the time the first case of COVID-19 in Indonesia was reported, China was already a presence to reckon with in the country. From government projects to consumer goods, to education, China was there.

Of course, there was the fact that the deadly virus was revealed to have its first human infection in China, where officials wrongly thought that they could contain the spread not only of the disease, but also news about it. That would earn China much global ire, but Beijing was quick in trying to counter that via a mask-and-vaccine diplomacy.

Much like its Aid Disaster Diplomacy during the early 2000s, the strategy was another big effort to project Beijing as [a generous and responsible power](#). At the same time, it sought to shift the narrative from China being the "originator" of the disease to one of "a major force and benefactor" willing to help the world battle the virus.¹⁸¹

Indonesia at the time had a rising number of COVID-19 cases. But the government said that there was no vaccine to be had – except for Sinovac, a China-made vaccine that Indonesian officials said could be the country’s only way out of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

Early on in the pandemic, Jakarta and Beijing signed an agreement that granted Indonesia state-owned vaccine producer PT Bio Farma the right to produce 50 million doses of Sinovac.¹⁸² This was also prior to China [approving](#) any vaccine for widespread use domestically.¹⁸³ Indonesia then became the primary importer of Chinese vaccines and Jokowi was [the first major world leader](#) to publicly receive the Sinovac shot.¹⁸⁴ Jokowi’s Sinovac jab was [televised](#) with a box labelled ‘Sinovac’ made visible during the broadcast to boost public trust and endorsement of the Chinese-made vaccine.¹⁸⁵

According to PT Bio Farma Director Honesti Basyir, the Indonesian government chose China’s Sinovac due to its fast development. When most other vaccine manufacturers had only reached the preclinical trial or phase 1 clinical trials, he said, Sinovac had completed its phase 2. “We need fast access to vaccine availability because this is the best chance to return to normal situation,” Basyir said.¹⁸⁶

Yet, as of December 2020, data from the Sinovac Vaccine’s third phase clinical trial’s safety and effectiveness were unknown. This was in [stark contrast](#) to Moderna, which even then was claiming an effectiveness rate of up to 94.5 percent, and Pfizer, which had disclosed efficacy data showing it be 90-percent effective.¹⁸⁷

Minister of State-Owned Enterprises Eric Tohir, however, said that the response to Indonesia’s requests from vaccine makers in Europe and the United States left much to be desired. He said at a January 2021 meeting at the House of Representatives,¹⁸⁸ “From the start, we contacted vaccine manufacturers from European and American countries, but the response was [very low](#). We can present the concrete evidence for that.”

Moreover, Nadia Tarmizi, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Health on COVID-19 vaccination, explained that Indonesia’s existing system [supported](#) Sinovac’s storage and distribution requirement.¹⁸⁹

According to Indonesia’s foreign affairs vice minister, Jakarta had exercised pro-active diplomacy to secure the supply of COVID-19 vaccines. Foreign Affairs Minister Retno Marsudi also co-chaired the multilateral cooperation program for vaccine COVAX Advance Market Commitment (AMC) Engagement Group (EG). For the record, COVAX-AMC EG is a forum of 92 AMC countries and donor nations for the procurement and distribution of vaccines for AMC countries. The COVAX Facility set a vaccine procurement target for 20 percent of the population of every AMC country and supports the readiness of AMC countries to undertake a national vaccination plan. “The procurement will be carried out

in stages because there are still limited vaccines available to all countries,” Retno stated. As it turned out and as shown in the table below, Jakarta became inordinately dependent on Chinese vaccines. It was only in March 2021 that other vaccines like Oxford-AstraZeneca landed on Indonesian shores. By that time, Indonesia had already received [more than 35 million](#) doses of raw materials and finished-form vaccines combined.¹⁹⁰ Indonesia’s vaccination drive had also started two months prior, in January 2021.

China’s Vaccine Diplomacy and How Sinovac Compared with Other Vaccines in Indonesia

DATE	EVENT DETAILS
23 March 2020	The Indonesian military transports medical gear from Shanghai to Jakarta, including disposable masks, N-95 masks, protective clothing, goggles, gloves, shoe covers, infrared thermometers, and surgical caps to be used by Indonesian doctors and fast-response team. ¹⁹¹
April 2020	Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterates China’s commitment to working together with Indonesia to fight COVID-19 during a phone call with President Jokowi. “ <i>We believe that with your perseverance, Indonesia will be able to defeat this [COVID-19] pandemic,</i> ” says Xi. ¹⁹²
18 May 2020	Xi announces concrete measures to boost the global fight against COVID-19, including providing international aid and making China’s COVID-19 vaccine a global public good when available. ¹⁹³
November 2020	Indonesia enters the monitoring stage of phase three clinical trial for Sinovac. The trial is conducted in Bandung, with 1,620 volunteers participating. Representatives from Sinovac, led by Yuan Sheng H, visit Indonesia and monitor the late-stage clinical trials at Puskesmas. ¹⁹⁴
9 December 2020	China subsequently adds the phrase “ fair and reasonable price ” when promoting its vaccines. At a press conference, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin states, “It is uncertain how they will be priced, but for China, one thing is clear. We will provide our vaccines to the world as <i>a global public good at a fair and reasonable price.</i> ” ¹⁹⁵
6 December 2020	Indonesia receives its first vaccine supply ; 1.2 million doses of Sinovac vaccine ¹⁹⁶
31 December 2020	1.8 million doses of Sinovac’s vaccine arrive in Indonesia. Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi says that there will be 15 million doses of vaccine bulk supply from Sinovac that will be manufactured by Bio Farma upon its arrival. ¹⁹⁷
January 2021	Indonesia launches first vaccination drive
12 January 2021	Raw materials of Sinovac vaccine arrive (15 million doses). The raw materials received are part of raw materials to be imported from Sinovac. As much as 140 million doses of delivery would be carried out gradually until July 2021. All of these raw materials would then be turned into the final product at the Indonesian state-owned pharmaceutical Bio Farma facility. ¹⁹⁸

China's Vaccine Diplomacy and How Sinovac Compared with Other Vaccines in Indonesia

DATE	EVENT DETAILS
2 February 2021	Another batch of Sinovac arrives: 10 million doses, ready to be distributed.
8 March 2021	The first batch of 1.1 million Oxford-AstraZeneca in finished form arrives via the COVAX facility multilateral cooperation. ¹⁹⁹
April 2021	China and Indonesia explore opportunities in the public-health sector to transform its medical aid system and a stronger relationship for China's Health Silk Road . ²⁰⁰
May 2021	By this time, 90 percent of Indonesia's 75.9 million vaccine doses received have been Sinovac vaccines. ²⁰¹
20 June 2021	10 million Sinovac-manufactured COVID-19 vaccines in the form of raw material or bulk arrive. With this batch, the total number of vaccines Indonesia has received totals 104,728,400 doses, or 94.5 million doses of Sinovac-manufactured vaccine, 8,228,400 doses of Astra-Zeneca vaccine, and two million doses of Sinopharm vaccine.
1 July 2021	998,400 doses of Japan-manufactured AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine arrive in Jakarta as a form of bilateral cooperation between the Government of Indonesia and the Government of Japan. ²⁰²
11 July 2021	Three million doses of Moderna COVID-19 vaccine arrive in ready-to-use form. ²⁰³
15 July 2021	At a press conference, the Chinese Ambassador to Indonesia, Xiao Qian, ensures China's continuous commitment to support Indonesia in its fight against COVID-19, particularly by providing vaccines. Xiao says that vaccine distribution and cooperation with Indonesia is the fastest among other countries in the region. ²⁰⁴
19 August 2021	First batch of Pfizer vaccine (1.5 million doses) arrives in Indonesia. ²⁰⁵

SPLIT PERSPECTIVES AMONG CITIZENS AND THE POLITICAL ELITE

China's vaccine-supply efforts were not without good results. Indonesians had the most favorable sentiment toward China during the COVID-19 pandemic, seeing Beijing as the most charitable nation in donating medical supplies, medications, and vaccines, according to ISEAS Poll 2022.²⁰⁶

More than two thirds of respondents in Indonesia (68.7 percent) identified China as the country that had provided the most vaccine support to the region. This was due in part to the government's efforts to [emphasize the reliability of Chinese vaccines](#).²⁰⁷ Chinese-made vaccines by Sinopharm and Sinovac were trusted the most by Indonesian respondents (35.1 percent), slightly higher than Pfizer and Moderna (34.4 percent).²⁰⁸

In addition, the Indonesian respondents had most confidence in China – alongside ASEAN, with which it tied at 25.2 percent -- as the strongest party to provide leadership in championing the global free-trade agenda.

And yet, the volunteers for the clinical trial of COVID-19 vaccine experienced psychological pressure with the spread of fake news, confusion about vaccination plans, and comments about their being guinea pigs. Recalled a volunteer: "I was told, 'How dare you be a guinea pig?' This vaccine is from China, let the Chinese people be tested first, not us. If you die, who will lose?"²⁰⁹

Meantime, thousands of kilometers away, the arrival of the first batch of Sinovac vaccines in Indonesia prompted a major discussion on the Chinese microblogging site Weibo, where the topic garnered 120 million views.

Jokowi's statement of thanks was published and aired on and on in numerous Chinese media outlets, and in conversations among Chinese Internet users. The conversations took on a [patriotic hue](#), with many arguing that the shipment proved China to be a responsible partner in international efforts to combat the virus.²¹⁰

At the same time, however, the shipment of vaccines and raw materials to other countries drew discontent from the Chinese. "Foreigners first, such is the style of a great country," said a sarcastic comment voted to the top (link in Chinese) under an article from state-run *Global Times*. "Indonesia should thank us Chinese people, even we are yet to be vaccinated," said a user on Weibo under the news. "Why do we want to give the vaccines to Indonesia? Have we forgotten about the pain inflicted by the murdering of Chinese people in the country?" asked a user which hit right at the heart of Indonesia-China relationship.²¹¹

Still and all, vaccine diplomacy elevated the partnership between China and Indonesia to an even higher level.

Today China remains as Indonesia's top economic partner. The combined value of commerce between China and Indonesia in 2020 was US\$78.5 billion. The entire amount of Indonesia's exports to China from January to December 2020 was US\$37.4 billion, up 10.10 percent from the same period in 2019. Among ASEAN members, Indonesia rose to fourth from fifth place in 2019 in the list of top exporters to China.²¹²

Through all sorts of activities across all sorts of platforms, exchange visits, phone calls, letters, and face-to-face meetings, relations between China and Indonesia have prospered. Such engagements had occurred not only between presidents and senior officials, but also between businessmen, journalists, students, and teachers from both countries, fortified by generous amounts of grants, loans, and official development aid mostly in the direction of Indonesia, from Beijing. Over the decades, China-Indonesia relations have moved from one of love to hate, to love again. By most accounts, China and Indonesia are now captivated by each other.

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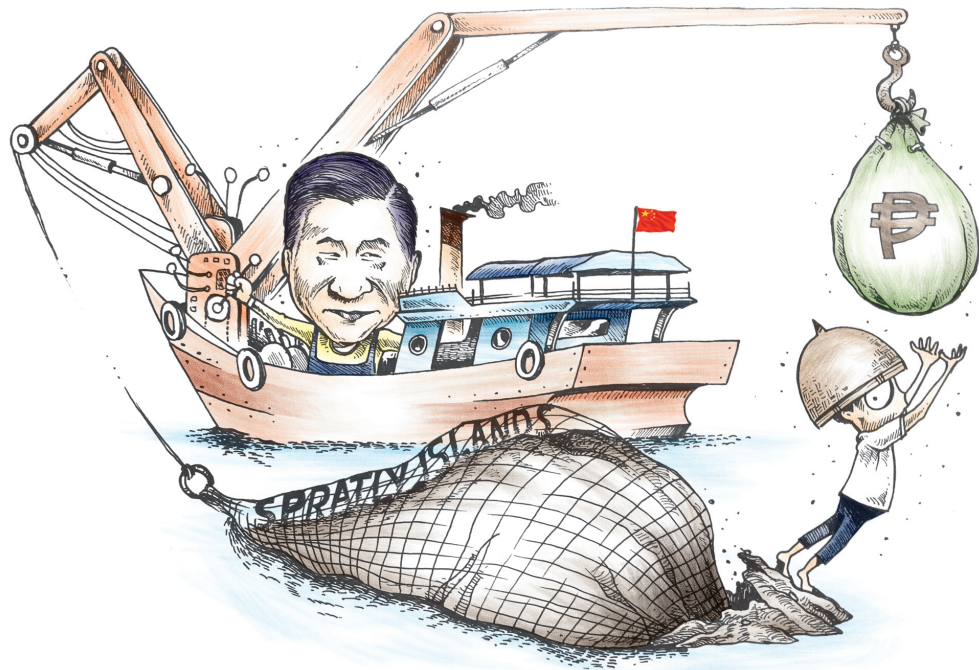
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China and The Philippines

Dangle Money, Claim the Seas





Fast Facts : THE PHILIPPINES

- Official Name : Republic of the Philippines
- Land area : 300,000 sq km²
- Population (PSA, 2023) : 109,035,343 million
- Capital : Manila
- Head of Government : President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.
- GDP (2020) : US\$367.362 billion
- GDP per capita : US\$ 3,372.529

Introduction

AS PHILIPPINE president from June 2016 to June 2022, Rodrigo R. Duterte dealt gingerly with China. Bent on pursuing his deadly anti-drug campaign, Duterte had early on lashed out against its critics, which happened to be the United States and other Western countries. He called them “imperialists” and quickly turned to China, which just as quickly offered him support for his administration’s projects, including his bloody war on drugs.

Under Duterte, Beijing threw pledges of big money at Manila, but largely failed to deliver. What China managed to accomplish instead -- with Duterte’s acquiescence -- was to fortify its naval armada in the contested islands off the South China Sea.

At first glance, Duterte’s posture toward China still drives Beijing-Manila relations under new president Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos Jr. He is the only son and namesake of the late strongman Ferdinand Marcos Sr. whose martial law regime marked by widespread corruption, cronyism, and human-rights violations ended with the People Power Revolt of 1986. Marcos Jr. was still a teenager when he accompanied his mother, then First Lady Imelda Marcos, to China in 1974, where they met with the late Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Mao Zedong.

Marcos Jr. has said that his administration “will continue to value the relationship between the Philippines and China more than we have done in the past few decades for the interest of our people, for the welfare of our people.” The truth is that his immediate predecessor Duterte had left him little wiggle room in dealing with China, and he will have to honor most, if not all, of the commitments Duterte struck with Beijing, however problematic they have turned out to be. Many of those professing to be his allies also have interests in the deals with China, which may mean the pressure on his administration to maintain strong ties with the Asian giant may be coming from within.

Marcos Jr., however, has added the Washington card back to his playing deck, and has even agreed to have expanded U.S. presence on Philippine soil. This dovetails with his expressed desire to honor the 2016 international arbitral ruling against China’s claims in

the South China Sea – as well as with Washington’s aims to have a stronger presence in the region. But China had been busy enforcing its claim on the contested waters during the Duterte years, and getting it to loosen its grip on these has only become even more complicated.

Soon after he assumed office on 1 July 2022, Marcos Jr. met first with U.S. President Joe Biden and other Western leaders, on the side of the UN General Assembly and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forums. He went on a state visit to China and met with President Xi Jinping only in January 2023. In contrast, China was among Duterte’s first foreign journeys as president in October 2016.

During his 48-hour red-carpet stay in Beijing, Marcos Jr. signed with Xi 14 agreements on agriculture, infrastructure, development cooperation, maritime security, tourism, electronic commerce, customs administration, and COVID-19 and disaster assistance. Many of these deals are “either revivals or continuations of unfulfilled accords from previous administrations,” [according to a political analyst quoted in a local paper](#).

The 14 deals include four loan agreements for “mixed-credit financing (US Dollar and Renminbi) of three priority bridge projects” of the Philippine government that Xi had promised to Duterte early on.

More to the point, retired career ambassador and columnist Hermenegildo C. Cruz said that Marcos Jr.’s China trip was “raising false expectations.” In a January 2023 opinion piece for the *Manila Times*, Cruz [wrote](#): “We already got burned with the US\$23-billion offer to President Duterte during his state visit to China. Only a minuscule amount of these investments pledged was implemented. Now BBM has been offered US\$21 billion in investments. This is the usual bait offered by major powers to least developed countries (LDCs) such that these agreements have been termed ‘ceremonial agreements.’ They are offered to the visiting leaders of LDCs (which they readily accept) to create the illusion that a state visit was a success. So, let us sit back and see how many of these so-called investments will be implemented.”

Like Duterte, Marcos Jr. gives China kid glove’s treatment when it comes to the disputed territories in the West Philippine Sea (WPS and by Beijing’s lingo, the South China Sea).

“The issues between our two countries are problems that do not belong between two friends, such as Philippines and China,” Marcos Jr. told reporters when asked about China’s naval incursions in the WPS. “We will seek to resolve those issues to mutual benefit of our two countries.”

Under Duterte, Manila’s foreign policy marked a pivot from decades-long dependence on the United States to tight bonding with China. Cases of extrajudicial killings throughout

Duterte's six-year term drew no criticism or rebuke from China. Instead, China gave grants to build four big drug rehabilitation facilities for Duterte's bloody 'war on drugs,' and promised multibillion dollars of loans to build bridges across the nation. Known by pejorative missives in the news media as 'The Punisher,' Duterte's savage 'war' on illegal drugs killed 6,500 suspected drug users and pushers, according to state reports, even as rights advocates say the actual death toll is more than four times that number.

From 2016 to 2019, Duterte made at least five state and official visits to China. On his first visit in 2016, he sought and secured from Xi Jinping pledges of loans, grants, official development aid, technical assistance for 27 agreements covering state and private sector projects worth about US\$9 billion in loans and US\$15 billion in investment pledges – for everything from power plants, steel mills, and banana plantations to ambitious reclamation projects, and inter-island bridge systems.

But until Duterte's term ended on 30 June 2022, most of the pledges remained pledges, and multiple 'flagship projects' that China was supposed to bankroll remained plans, while the few that pushed through still face resistance by affected communities. A big dam irrigation project in the north and a giant dam project in the south of Manila were met with resistance by indigenous communities for their destructive effects on people's livelihoods and the environment. Other projects are tied up on right-of-way, bidding, and procurement issues.

NOTE VERBALES FOR CHINA, WAR GAMES WITH U.S.

Instead of genuine development projects funded with China money, what actually became real under Duterte was the bolder claim and bigger presence of Chinese naval militia, weaponry, and troops in the West Philippine Sea. About 7,500 islands and reefs in the South China Sea are the object of conflicting maritime and territorial claims among China, the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam.

The conflict has hit home among Filipino fisherfolk, who together with farmers make up the poorest sector of Philippine society. China's naval troops have repeatedly pushed back the small fishing boats of local fishers, prompting calls from citizens for a bolder response from Duterte. A man given to vitriol, cursing, and unprintable prose, Duterte would turn pacifist, petrified even, and cautioned restraint when talking about how China reclaimed islands, built big structures, and deployed a naval armada in the WPS.

"Do you want war against China?" he asked reporters in 2019. "Well, I'll tell you, even on the coast (or) beach of Palawan, before you can take off, the missile of China would be there in about five or 10 minutes."

Days before he left office, Duterte raised caution again, saying, “We cannot afford fighting with China. We cannot win and we will lose, and the population will suffer.” This was just weeks after the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) had filed yet another note verbale with the Chinese Embassy in Manila to protest “the return of over 100 Chinese vessels illegally operating in the waters in and around Julian Felipe Reef on 04 April 2022.” A year earlier, the DFA had protested against a similar swarming incident in the same area.

Avoiding a war with China is apparently also the reason why Duterte’s successor Marcos Jr. sings the same tune toward Beijing -- as if Filipinos demand going to war or think that war is the only way to assert and protect Philippine sovereignty.

Marcos Jr. echoes Duterte’s position on China. Going to war with China “is the last thing we need right now,” he told reporters days before his inaugural as president. “We talk to China consistently with a firm voice...We cannot go to war... so we have to continue to discuss with them the conflicting claims that we have with China and that China has with other members of the ASEAN.”

In 2022 alone, the Philippines had issued [193 note verbales](#) against China, including 65 in the first six months of the Marcos Jr. administration, according to DFA. On 12 December 2022, Manila filed a diplomatic protest over the Chinese Coast Guard’s illegal actions involving the rocket debris retrieval operations of the Philippine Navy weeks earlier.

By 14 February 2023 the Philippines had filed [eight more note verbales](#) with the Chinese embassy in Manila to protest “the shadowing, harassment, dangerous maneuvers, directing of military-grade laser, and illegal radio challenges by CCG vessel 5205 against PCG (Philippine Coast Guard) vessel BRP Malapascua on February 6 (2023).”

On the same day, Marcos Jr. summoned the Chinese ambassador to Manila – the first time a Philippine president had done so in recent history – for closed-door discussions at the presidential palace.

This high-level message of protest from Manila came 12 days after Marcos Jr. approved plans to “accelerate the full implementation of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)” with the United States. The agreement to open [“four and the substantial completion of the projects in the existing five Agreed Locations”](#) was also disclosed in a 2 February 2023 U.S. Embassy press statement.

According to the statement, EDCA “supports combined training, exercises, and interoperability between our forces” and its expansion “will make our alliance stronger and more resilient, and will accelerate modernization of our combined military capabilities.”

A month later, the Philippines and the United States announced plans to hold their [largest Balikatan exercise](#) or “war games” with 17,600 troops expected to participate, including 12,000 U.S. troops, 5,000 Philippine soldiers, and 111 more from the Australian Defense Force. This number was twice as many as the 8,900 troops that participated in the same Philippine-U.S. war games in 2022.

The exercises were to take place from 11 to 28 April 2023 in Northern Luzon, Palawan, and Antique provinces – areas close to or on the sidelines of the WPS. The touted highlight of the exercises: Filipino and U.S. troops would sink a target vessel near Panatag (Scarborough) Shoal in the West Philippine Sea.

TRADE, AID, LOANS

On the security and defense front, Manila’s relations with Beijing now traverse rough, testy waters. A similarly skewed story lingers for Manila on the trade, investments, and even aid, fronts.

In the 50-year history of Philippines-China relations, bilateral trade has always turned in China’s favor. China has always been one of the biggest markets for Philippine exports, and one of the top sources of key Philippine imports.

In October 2022, China exported US\$5.76 billion and imported US\$1.72 billion from Philippines, resulting in a [positive trade balance of US\\$4.04 billion for Beijing](#).

Between October 2021 and October 2022, China exports increased by US\$949 million (19.8 percent) from US\$4.81 billion to US\$5.76 billion, while imports slipped by negative US\$405 million (-19.1 percent) from US\$2.12 billion to US\$1.72 billion in 2020, according to the Observatory of Economic Complexity based out of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the United States.

(An online data visualization and distribution platform, the OEC, “integrates and distributes data from a variety of sources to empower analysts in the private sector, public sector, and academia.”)

According to OEC, in October 2022, “the top exports of China to the Philippines were [rubber footwear](#) (US\$177M), [other toys](#) (US\$165M), [coated flat-rolled iron](#) (US\$156M), [telephones](#) (US\$152M), and [integrated circuits](#) (US\$137M). In October 2022, the top imports of China from the Philippines were [integrated circuits](#) (US\$712M), [nickel ore](#) (US\$256M), [semiconductor devices](#) (US\$84.8M), [office machine parts](#) (US\$71.9M), and [computers](#) (US\$69.4M).

More than a year earlier, in August 2021, OEC said that the Philippines' top exports to China were [integrated circuits](#) (US\$223M), [nickel ore](#) (US\$201M), [refined copper](#) (US\$116M), [commodities not elsewhere specified](#) (US\$78M), and [electrical capacitors](#) (US\$51.5M). The top imports of the Philippines from China meanwhile were [commodities not elsewhere specified](#) (US\$230M), [refined petroleum](#) (US\$163M), [telephones](#) (US\$127M), [vaccines, blood, antisera, toxins, and cultures](#) (US\$122M), and [unglazed ceramics](#) (US\$75.9M).

That year, China had become the top market for Philippine exports, and the top source of Philippine imports. Per OEC data, the Philippines exported mostly to [China](#) (US\$1.06B), followed by the [United States](#) (US\$1.04B), [Japan](#) (US\$952M), [Hong Kong](#) (US\$931M), and [Singapore](#) (US\$393M). It also imported mostly from [China](#) (US\$2.48B), followed by [Japan](#) (US\$984M), [South Korea](#) (US\$819M), [United States](#) (US\$691M), and [Thailand](#) (US\$680M).

China had extended multibillion dollars' worth of about 101 various grants, project loans, donations, ODA-like, and technical assistance programs to the Philippines from 2003 to 2017, AidData records show.

The funds went to supporting Duterte's war on drugs; aid for injured soldiers; hardware, rifles, training, and construction equipment for the military and police; disaster response operations; rehabilitation of the Islamic City of Marawi; bridges and infrastructure projects; book donations, scholarship programs, and construction of school buildings; exchange programs for academics, journalists, and state personnel; and even credit facility for private companies associated with Duterte allies.

According to AidData, these included China projects, activities, and programs in the Philippines such as:

- Donation of 3,000 rifles, three million rounds of ammunition, and 30 sniper cones worth PHP 169 million (US\$3 million) for the fight against terrorists in Marawi City;
- Donation of 3,000 rifles and six million pieces of ammunition worth CNY 50 million (US\$7.27 million) to support fight against terrorism in Marawi City;
- PHP 65 million (US\$1.2 million) for troops injured in Marawi City;
- CNY 20-million (US\$3 million) grant for the Marawi City Restoration Project;
- CNY150 million (US\$22 million) for reconstruction of Marawi City;
- Pledges to finance the Subic-Clark Railway Project;
- US\$690 million syndicated loan for Clark Global City Project;
- CNY 1 million (US\$145,200) for avian flu response and prevention activities in 2017;

- Grant for construction of drug rehabilitation facility in Agusan del Sur Province;
- Grant for construction of drug rehabilitation facility in Sarangani Province;
- 3,000 units of solar-powered street light and home solar power systems;
- US\$1 million for the rehabilitation of Surigao following the earthquake;
- US\$220-million loan from Bank of China for Chelsea Logistics and Infrastructure Holdings Corp. to acquire acquisition of stake in 2GO Group;
- 400 transistor radios to Presidential Communications Operations Office;
- Nanning City and Davao City bilateral agreement for a student exchange program;
- China holds training program for Philippine Coast Guard officers;
- US\$600,000 to the government of Davao City to build school facilities;
- State Grid Corporation facilitated Trailblazer's training program for personnel of National Grid Corporation of the Philippines;
- Pledge of US\$6 billion in soft loans in October 2016;
- Bank of China provides US\$3 billion credit facility to the Philippines in 2016;
- CNY100-million (US\$14.5 million) ETCA in October 2016 for anti-illegal drug activities and law enforcement cooperation purposes for Philippines;
- Yunnan Police Officer Academy held drug control and law enforcement training program for Philippines officers;
- CNY 50-million (US\$7.25 million) grant - through October 2016 ETCA - for provision of law enforcement equipment to Philippine National Police and Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency;
- Donation of 2,000 books to Philippines National Library
- US\$116.6-million preferential buyer's credit loan for Phase 2 of Angat Water Utilization and Aqueduct Improvement Project;
- China Development Bank provides US\$117.3-million term loan for Phase 8A Expansion and 8B Core and Intelligent Network Expansion, Phase 3 3G Expansion, and Phase 8B NCR and SLZ BSS Expansion Project (Linked to Project ID#63020);
- China Development Bank provides US\$493-million buyer's credit loan for 632MW Mariveles Coal-Fired Power Plant Construction Project;
- US\$89.15 million from China Eximbank in preferential buyer's credit for Agno River Integrated Irrigation Project;
- CNY 800-million (US\$116 million) government concessional loan for Phase 2 of the Non-Intrusive Container Inspection System Project;
- Donation of 30 metric tons of hybrid rice;
- US\$28-million credit facility for purchase of medicines from China's Herbal Medical University/BioMedical Engineering Center;

- US\$100-million credit line for hybrid rice production;
- US\$- million grant for establishment of the Philippines-Sino Center for Agricultural Technology;
- CNY100 million (US\$14.5 million) for batch of weapons and military equipment for anti-drug and counter-terrorism operations;
- US\$500 million loan to procure military equipment;
- Donation of bulldozers and road graders valued at CNY 10 million (US\$145,200) to the Philippines' military in 2006;
- Donation of military construction equipment worth PHP 80 million (US\$1.46 million); and
- Donation of four naval patrol boats and 30 RPGs.

CHINA'S BRI AND DUTERTE'S BBB

China's Belt and Road Initiative or BRI became one of the focal points of the Duterte government's cordial relations with China, despite ongoing territorial issues, low public opinion of China, and the Philippines' security partnerships with major powers defending the current international order (Baviera and Arugay 2021).

The [upgrading](#) of the ties to "comprehensive strategic cooperation"¹ status and the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on Belt and Road Initiative Cooperation during Xi Jinping's November 2018 visit formalized the era of greater cooperation between the two countries.

Through the BRI, Duterte had hoped to finance his ambitious Build, Build, Build (BBB) program of over 100 'flagship projects' that would supposedly usher in the 'Golden Era of Philippine infrastructure.' A number of mainland Chinese entities saw opportunities to invest or participate in the construction of approved projects, enticed by Duterte's pro-China messages.

The Chinese, in fact, have been the most successful in securing appointments with Duterte, with 14 of the 32 meetings from December 2016 to June 2018² held in the presidential palace in Manila or Duterte's hometown, Davao City, excluding courtesy calls of businessmen during his trips abroad. Rather than connectivity-related projects, however, their proposals were for big-ticket reclamation, casino resorts, and theme-park projects ([Ranada P., 2018](#)).

Highlights of the MOU between China and the Philippines on Cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative

Premise. In the ten-page non-binding MOU signed in Manila on 20th November 2018, the Philippines recognize that the BRI is in line with China's aim "to take its economic progress and development further by offering to assist in the development of other countries..."

Framework and Principles. The two countries will work together:

- within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative
- with the strictest respect for national laws, rules, regulations, and policies to realize sustainable growth and development that is *not* at the expense of the other.
- Mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty
- Complete transparency in common endeavors to expand mutually beneficial cooperation through extensive consultation, joint contribution, and the sharing of benefits
- Maximize existing bilateral, regional, and multilateral mechanisms in accordance with the vision of the BRI.

Five Areas of Cooperation.

1. Policy Dialogue and Communication - conducting regular dialogues on macroeconomic policies and development strategies;
2. Infrastructure development and connectivity – encouraging infrastructure development and connectivity in transportation, telecommunication, energy sector and other areas of mutual interest;
3. Cooperation on Trade and Investment - enhancing communication and exchanges to improve trade flows, investment environments; and adhering to respective national customs rules, regulations, documentation and control to facilitate lawful trade;
4. Financial cooperation – expanding the use of local currencies in bilateral trade and investment, providing financial support and services for that purpose; establishing a cooperation mechanism to deal with financial risk and crisis; increasing exchange and cooperation between credit investigation regulators and interbank institutional investors
5. Socio-cultural exchanges – promoting people-to-people exchanges, cultural cooperation, education, travel, and encourage stronger communication between their peoples

Modes of Cooperation may include the following:

1. High-level visits, exchanges, and dialogues among stakeholders
2. Pilot programs, research and development, capacity building, and training in key areas
3. Investment and financial support for projects and programs agreed to ensure efficient and successful implementation of the MOU on the basis of free-market principles and mutually beneficial arrangements

Others:

- Settlement of differences: amicable settlement through consultations via diplomatic channels
- The MOU is effective for four years, open to termination upon a three-month prior notice or renewal for a subsequent four-year period through a notice three months before expiration

Source: Copy of MOU obtained from gmanetwork.com

Duterte's meetings with Chinese business executives, Dec 2016 – June 2018

DATE	COMPANY AND REPRESENTATIVES	INDUSTRY/ COMPANY	BUSINESS PROPOSAL
5 Dec 2016	Huang Rulun, founder of Century Golden Resources (first Chinese tycoon to secure a private audience with Duterte)		(unclear if the meeting was for the purpose of or as a result/ after donating a drug rehabilitation center in Nueva Ecija)
10 Jan 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jose Kho, President of Friends of the Philippines Foundation (a group of Chinese businessmen with roots or business interests in Xiamen; they had lunch with Duterte during his first official visit to Beijing) - Kho of The Kho Group - UAA Kinming Development Corporation, and Ramon Tulfo 	Real estate	<p>(offers to foot the bill for the construction of a Mazu shrine in the Manila Bay area; later in October 2017 speaks with former tourism secretary Wanda Teo)</p> <p>Four months later, Kho again meets with Duterte to receive the Kamagí Medal of the Order of Lapu-Lapu (which Duterte created to recognize individuals, either in government or private sector, who “actively participated in and contributed significantly to” any of his campaigns or advocacies)</p>
27 Feb 2017	Wilson Chu of China Gezhouba Group Company International	General construction contractor based in Wuhan; also engaged in natural gas and oil distribution, hydropower, construction and operation of highways, among others	
5 Dec 2016	Chinese Business Groups		
	Carmelito Mercado with Chinese business partners		
	Zhang Zongyan, President of China Railway Group Limited	Construction company whose majority shares belong to state-owned China Railway Engineering Corp	
30 Mar 2017	China state-owned companies		
23 Aug 2017	Senior management of China Communications Construction Co Ltd	Transportation infrastructure firm	

Duterte's meetings with Chinese business executives, Dec 2016 – June 2018

DATE	COMPANY AND REPRESENTATIVES	INDUSTRY/ COMPANY	BUSINESS PROPOSAL
4 Sept 2017 (at the 18th Cabinet meeting)	Dr Yang Zhihui, chairman of Landing International Development Ltd		147-hectare reclamation for a theme park and resort in Manila Bay
25 Oct 2017	Jack Ma, Alibaba		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Senior management of Shanghai Nanjiang Group Co Ltd - and Arcplus Group PLC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Real estate, mining and energy company that has MOU with Makati for a mass housing project - (Arcplus) architecture design and engineering 	
6 Dec 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Che-woo, chairman and - Francis Lui Yiu Tung, vice chairman of Galaxy Entertainment 		Boracay casino-resort
6 Dec 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Che-woo, chairman and - Francis Lui Yiu Tung, vice chairman of Galaxy Entertainment 		Boracay casino-resort
11 Jan 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clarence Chung, chairman and president of Melco Crown (Philippines) Resorts Corporation), and - Lawrence Ho, chairman and CEO of Melco Resorts and Entertainment 		City of Dreams in the PAGCOR Entertainment City in Paranaque
28 May 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jose Kho of Friends of the Philippines Foundation, - Kitson Kho of The Kho Group and - UAA Kinming Development Corporation 		407-hectare New Manila International Community, a smart "city within a city" approved by then Manila Mayor Joseph Estrada and the Philippine Reclamation Authority

For the connectivity projects, Duterte in a meeting with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in 2017 offered China the chance to name any of its companies to help put up the Philippines' 3rd telecommunications player ([Ranada P., 2017](#)). Of course, there were also the infrastructure and transportation projects under the government's BBB program that the Chinese were interested in ([Ranada P., 2018](#)).

As of 2020, some of the entities and the BRI / BBB projects involving Chinese companies or parties include:

Roads, railways, subways, bridges:

- o The Chinese government in August 2019 extended a development assistance in the construction of the Subic-Clark Railway Project in Luzon and the Mindanao Railway Project;
- o China Railway Design Corporation is involved in the Bicol railway line;
- o Chinese entities are also involved in the Binondo-Intramuros Bridge in Manila and Estrella-Pantaleon Bridge in Makati.

Ports:

- o Mainland Chinese companies have expressed interest in taking over the operation of the 300-hectare shipyard in Subic Bay;
- o China's National Construction and Agricultural Machinery Import/Export Corporation is involved in the construction of major facilities that include wharves and market facilities in the Japan-funded expansion of the General Santos City fishing port complex to into a major fishing port with harvest infrastructure in Mindanao;
- o The dredging subsidiary of China Communication Construction Company (CCCC) and China Harbour Engineering Co. have partnered with Mega Harbor Port for projects at the Cebu International Container and Bulk Terminal in Tayud under a PPP with Cebu Port Authority and NEDA

Airports:

- o CCCC and MacroAsia, which has been awarded a contract for runway improvement and related projects at Sangley Point International Airport, have been collaborating, but the pandemic has delayed the fulfilment of the post-qualification requirements for the signing of the joint-venture contract with the Cavite government;
- o CCCC has partnered with Megawide Construction Corp for the construction work at Clark International Airport expected to be completed by summer 2020;
- o Chinese airlines have established more direct flights connecting major mainland Chinese cities such as Chengdu, Chongqing, and Xiamen with Philippines tourist destinations such as Cebu.

Energy:

- o In energy distribution, State Grid Corporation of China (SGCC) in 2007 entered the electricity distribution market after winning a bid for license to operate the National

Grid Corporation for 25 years. SGCC holds 40 percent of a consortium with Monte Oro Grid Resources Corp and Calaca High Power Corp (operations of SGCC were relatively unknown to the public; some concerns regarding potential risks of ceding control to a foreign country);

- o In energy production, Power China and its subsidiaries have committed around US\$3 billion to investments in 11 projects that are under construction, which include the coal-fired power plants at Kauswagan and Dinginin (Mariveles) and a direct current power transmission converter station for the Visayas and Mindanao;
- o Sale of components or partnering with locals in renewable energy such as photovoltaic and wind power by selling components: China National Electric Engineering Co. and China CACS Engineering Co (two subsidiaries of mainland China National Machinery Industry Corporation) have signed an engineering, procurement and construction contract with Sunray Power Inc for the development of solar energy projects and the construction of 100MV photovoltaic installation in Clark Green City;
- o Qingdao's Hengshun Zhongsheng Group has entered into an agreement with Energy Logics Philippines for the construction of combined wind-solar projects including the ones in Burgos and Pasuquin in northern Philippines;
- o CNOOC Gas and Power, a subsidiary of China national Offshore Oil Corporation, has partnered with Phoenix Petroleum Philippines to build a Liquefied Natural Gas terminal in Batangas;
- o The Philippines and China established an inter-governmental Joint Steering Committee (in October 2019) to better coordinate joint exploration of natural resources in the South China Sea, though difficult negotiations over contracts are still ongoing

Smart Cities:

- o Ho & Partners Architects, Engineers, & Development Consultants Ltd from Hong Kong SAR designed the City of Pearl, implemented by the local UAA Kinming Group Development Corporation in partnership with mainland Chinese companies.

Industrial Cities:

- o Mainland Chinese companies are already playing important roles in economic zones and industrial park projects through the Philippines-China Industrial Park Development Program, which includes the 500-hectare Clark Industrial Park financed by the China Exim Bank and being constructed by the China Energy Engineering Group. The BCDA has also signed an MOU with China Development Bank.

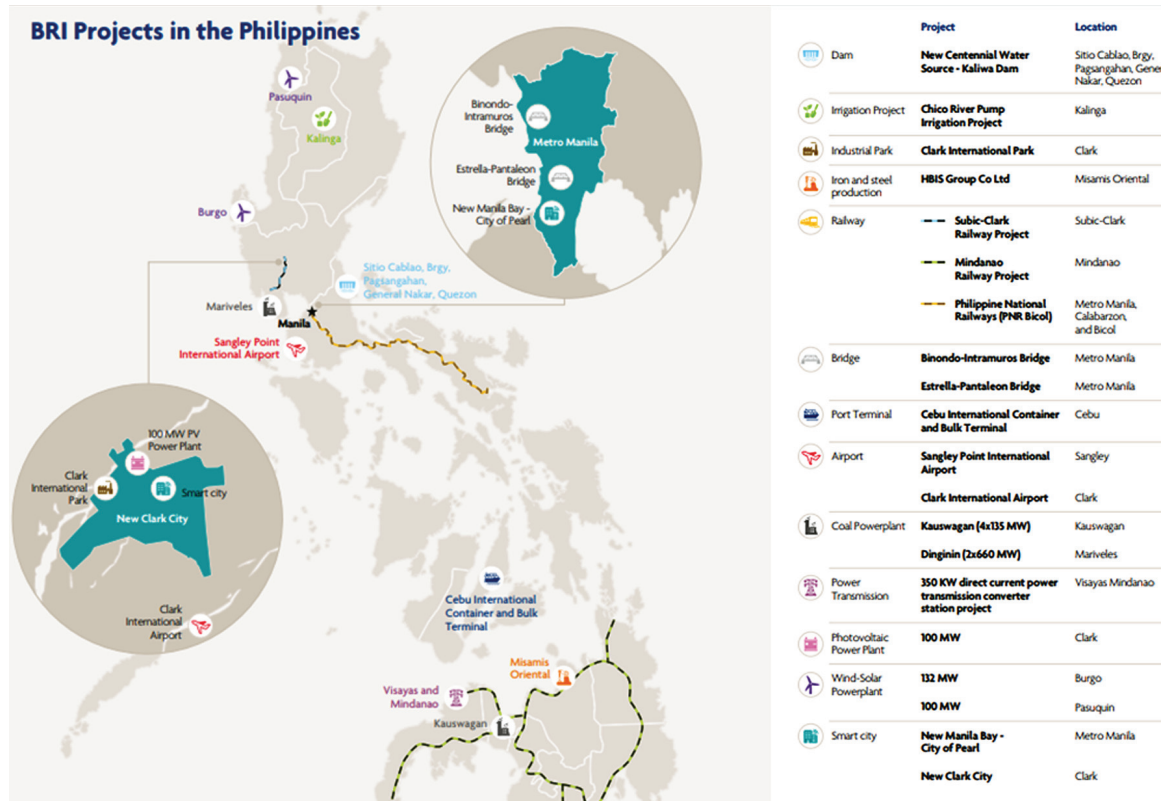
Steel:

- o The mainland Chinese state-owned HBIS Group, one of mainland China's and the world's largest steelmakers, is partnering with Huili Investment Fund Management, Steel Asia Manufacturing Corporation, the Department of National Defense and the Board of Investments in this effort. The MOU outlines the creation of an integrated steel complex on 305 hectares of PHIVIDEC Industrial Authority land in Misamis Oriental. The investment is expected to be worth US\$4.4 billion. The plant is to be established in two stages. It will significantly increase steel production capacity and create 20,000 job opportunities. The government expects to create up to 65,000 jobs in related businesses around the iron and steel production base (Park 2020).

In addition to the strong public pronouncements in favor of China and the MOU on BRI cooperation, the influx of Chinese entities – government, state-owned, and private enterprises – was facilitated by policy reforms and other steps taken by the government to attract foreign investors (Park 2020). These include:

- Passage of Philippine Competition Act and 2016 start of operations of Philippine Competition Commission;
- Prioritization of liberalizing the domestic capital and foreign exchange markets;
- Amendment to the Public Service Act, which allows full foreign ownership in the transportation, communication and power industries;
- Removal of restrictions in the Internet sector, tertiary education, and finance and insurance by the end of 2018;
- Liberalization of foreign investors' participation in contracts for the construction and repair of locally funded public works (from 25-percent to 40-percent ownership) and private radio communications networks (from 20 percent to 40 percent);
- Free-trade agreements with China (via ASEAN) and Hong Kong SAR, which provide substantial protection for investors in the BRI project;
- Visa-on-arrival policy and the relaxation of visa issuance requirement for mainland Chinese workers.

BRI Projects in the Philippines



Source: (Park 2020) (not in the list: US\$700 stainless steel plant to be built by Global Ferronickel Holdings Inc and Chinese SOE Baiyin Nonferrous Group, which has acquired a 5.48% stake in the former, one of the biggest nickel producers in the Philippines with mines in Surigao del Norte and Palawan.)

Many scholars and analysts, however, have raised numerous concerns about the BRI projects. Among their most notable observations are:³

- The lack of transparency (in part due to past experiences with projects tainted by corruption or political accommodation). There had been evidence of the limited effectiveness of Duterte’s transparency and open government measures, such as the landmark executive order on Freedom of Information (FOI), the creation of an electronic FOI portal, and a Philippine infrastructure transparency portal, particularly with respect to securing detailed information and vital documents (e.g. feasibility studies) of foreign-funded infrastructure projects;⁴
- The low quality of materials and technology provided, and the reliability and track records of the companies undertaking them. For example, some Chinese firms such as the China Road and Bridge Corp. (CRBC), the China Harbour Engineering Corp. (CHEC), and their parent company China Communications Construction

Company (CCCC), which had been awarded a contract, had been banned by the World Bank due to fraudulent practices in previous Philippine projects (Dizon 2016);

- BRI as the source of a new debt trap, particularly after revelations that Sri Lanka was forced to cede control of its Hambantota port to China for 99 years, following Sri Lanka's failure to repay its debt. In the Philippines, similar concerns were raised vociferously by Duterte's critics who opposed his close ties to China (Nonato 2017);
- Entry and possible influx of Chinese workers into the Philippines. There have been anecdotal reports over the last several years of Chinese nationals working in construction projects and in mining. Anticipating public opposition to the influx of larger numbers of Chinese workers in construction projects, the Philippine government in April 2019 negotiated an undertaking from the Chinese government that it would bring in Chinese staff only for "highly technical" positions; in exchange, the Philippines would establish training schools for local construction workers for Chinese-funded projects (Rabena 2019);
- Security concerns posed by the agreements entered into, and particularly by the draft memorandum on joint oil and gas production in the West Philippine Sea (Buan 2018); by the grant of franchise to Mislattel, the telecommunications company of Duterte crony Dennis Uy and their partner China Telecom; and by the PHP 20-billion (US\$364 million) project of the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), dubbed "Safe Philippines," given that supplier Huawei was already embroiled in issues of security and data protection;
- Collateralization of Philippine natural resources⁵ and their negative social, environmental, and governance impacts;⁶ and
- The risk of China-funded ventures becoming "white elephants" or mega-projects that generate larger burdens and costs than benefits for the host economies,⁷ such as the PHP 83-billion (US\$1.5 billion) Mindanao Railway Phase 1 project, the PHP 45-billion (US\$819 million) Subic-Clark Railway, and the PHP 12.2-billion (US\$222 million) Kaliwa Dam project.⁸

In August 2019, Duterte and Xi signed several agreements expanding existing ones and involving mainland Chinese financial institutions to support infrastructure projects.⁹

SLOW, STALLED, CONTROVERSIAL PROJECTS

Progress in infrastructure cooperation remained slow until the end of Duterte's term.

Firstly, many of them were not meant to finish during his term given that the [infrastructure cooperation](#) signed in November 2018 spans 10 years. Secondly, extended lockdowns and urgent spending need during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led the Philippine government to reprioritize its infrastructure investments and temporarily suspend many BRI projects. Mark Villar, then Public Works secretary, said that there was strong intention on Manila's part to continue engaging with mainland China on infrastructure projects, as soon as the pandemic eased. Thirdly, some of the projects that had already been initiated have been and continue to be strongly opposed.

Among those rolled out were:

- The Binondo-Intramuros and Estrella-Pantaleon bridges under the Metro Manila Logistics Network project (a grant); and
- The controversial Chico River Pump Irrigation Project (CRPIP) that critics say could seriously harm a nature preserve (Chang 2021; Rey 2021).

The Safe Philippines Project Phase 1, a surveillance project with the Department of the Interior and Local Government was scrapped. Eight other projects that were seen to be done by 2023 include PNR South Long-Haul project to Bicol, the Mindanao Railway, and the fiercely opposed Kaliwa Dam. The grant for Marawi rehabilitation and two expressway projects were placed in the pipeline (Rey, 2021).

FDIS AND TRADE

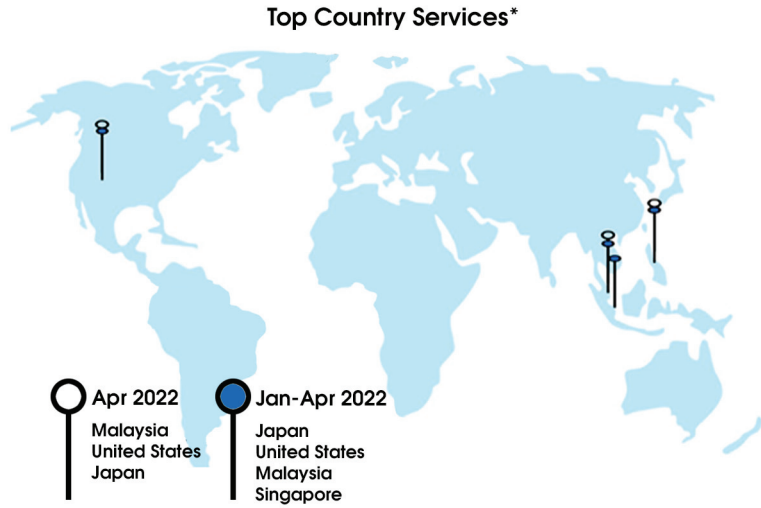
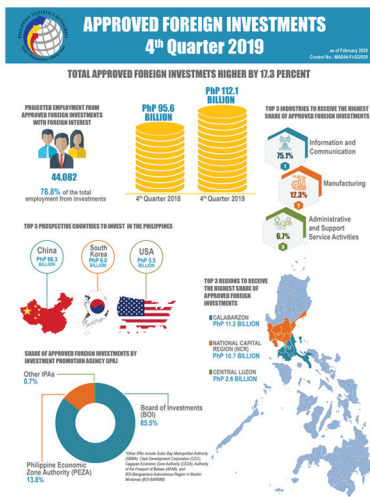
Outside of BBB/BRI, the improved political relationship between Manila and Beijing helped boost foreign direct investment (FDI) flows from both private and state-owned mainland Chinese companies to the Philippines, amid attempts to improve local public perception toward China, even through vaccine donations.

In June 2017, Chengdu Institute of Biological Products, a subsidiary of China National Pharmaceutical Group (Sinopharm), together with UNICEF, provided 480,000 doses of Type B encephalitis vaccine (Park 2020).

By the end of 2018, more than 30 percent of the FDI projects approved by the Philippines' Investment Promotion Agency were from mainland China. Mainland Chinese FDI increased by 74.9 percent from 2018 to 2019, or even higher if compared to pre-MOU figures.

Yet, from topping the list of approved investments in 2019, China was nowhere in the list of top sources of actual investments by the end of Duterte’s term.

Top Country Sources of Approved Investment 2019 (PSA 2020) and FDI as of April 2022 (BSP 2022).



Economic relations with traditional partners were maintained, however, and no policy reversals affected economic commitments with the West.¹⁰ China’s role in the Philippine economy swiftly grew and bilateral relations markedly improved, as indicated by higher flow of Chinese trade and investments, and the increase in tourist arrivals from China.¹¹

Top Trading Partners (2015 and 2019)		
COUNTRY	2015 Rank and Total Trade (in billion US\$)	2019 Rank and Total Trade (in billion US\$)
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA	2 nd 17.65	1 st 35.31
JAPAN	1 st 18.67	2 nd 21.25
USA	3 rd 16.49	3 rd 19.64

Source: PSA

China became the country’s largest trade partner (by 2016), its top import source, the second largest investor, third-largest export market, fastest-growing tourist market pre-pandemic (tripled from 2016-2019), and emerging infrastructure builder. Including Hong Kong, China accounts for over a quarter of the Philippines’ external trade. Even with the unprecedented global health crisis, the

country’s trade with China continued to grow (especially imports of Philippine agricultural and electronic goods). By the fifth month of the pandemic, China had overtaken the United States and Japan as the country’s biggest export market.¹²

The Chinese Embassy in Manila lost no time to trumpet the supposed progress in bilateral ties. In a 2021 statement, the Embassy wrote: “In 2020, the bilateral trade between our two countries reached 61.15 billion USD, with a year-on-year increase of 0.3%. China’s non-financial direct investment in the Philippines hit US\$140 million USD, which was 1.36 times more than the number in 2019.”

“During the first quarter this year,” the embassy continued, “the bilateral trade reached 16.49 billion USD and China’s non-financial direct investment in the Philippines 27.36 million USD, increased by 34.7% and 85.2% respectively.”

“China remains the largest trading partner, the largest source of imports, the third largest export market and the second largest foreign investors of the Philippines,” it said. “Tropical fruits from the Philippines such as bananas and avocados have been served on the dining tables of more and more Chinese families.”

Additional capital investments, apart from the electrical grid deal, came from leading Chinese SOEs (state-owned enterprises) and private firms such as China Telecom in DITO Telecom and Panhua Group’s Integrated Steel Plant project.

In the advanced manufacturing sector, the high-end bearing factory operated by C&U Group and the electronics components factories by Shenzhen Grandsun and Guangzhou Bocheng are examples. Too, around 100 Chinese online-gambling firms (which are registered as non-Chinese companies) have ranked among the Manila’s largest foreign investors.

Compared to the 2,785 new firms under Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and 3,647 under Benigno S. Aquino III, there were 2,767 under Duterte in just the first two years of his term (not yet including the Chinese online-gambling firms, as many of them use offshore financial centers or foreign countries for registration or domiciling) – signaling the greater role of Chinese money and “flexible capital” in Philippine business and economy (Camba 2021).

Close to the end of Duterte’s term, however, the pivot to China was revealed as performing poorly vis-à-vis expected economic benefits. Of the USD\$24 billion pledged investments and loans, only about five percent had come to fruition, and China placed a mere sixth in the country’s list of foreign aid providers (Vitug 2021). This is not to say that investments and loans are automatically beneficial to the ordinary Filipino. Overall, the Philippine government has always attracted “foreign investments” purportedly to create jobs, but this has been done by peddling Filipino workers as cheap labor – cheaper than those of other underdeveloped countries. Indeed, slave rates, contractualization, lack of benefits, inhumane working conditions, and even trade-union repression continue to characterize the plight of Filipino workers.

Furthermore, payments and penalties on loans, spent on projects that do not resolve the poor's most basic and urgent needs, are borne by the poor majority. At the end of the day, economic performance should be measured in terms of the economic benefits to the people.

"As to the bilateral G-to-G cooperation projects," Chinese Ambassador to Manila Huang Xilian said in a 2021 [article](#), "more than 30 projects have been carried out in President Duterte's administration. Specifically, 12 projects with a total value of around US\$100 million, including the Dangerous Drug Abuse Treatment Rehabilitation Centers and the COVID-19 Vaccine Donation Project, have been launched and completed. Among them, the China-aided Two Bridges Project in Manila, Philippine-Sino Center for Agricultural Technology-Technical Cooperation Program Phase III and Chico River Pump Irrigation Project are expected to be completed within this year."

He added that four major infrastructure projects worth US\$ 2.3 billion, including the Samal Island-Davao City Connector Project, had signed commercial contracts and were under loan negotiation. A list of pipeline projects worth billions of U.S. dollars was under the Philippine internal review and bidding process.

In terms of financial cooperation, China has supported the Philippines in raising funds through bilateral and multilateral channels. Since 2016, major Chinese financial institutions have granted credit facility worth around US\$3.4 billion to Filipino enterprises, underwritten the Philippine government securities worth around US\$1.1 billion, and invested in the Philippine government securities worth around US\$300 million. China has supported the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in approving nearly US\$1.3 billion loans to the Philippines for infrastructure improvement and COVID-19 response.

China has also supported the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in financing the Philippines with around US\$26.5 billion cumulatively to conduct projects in education, healthcare, and infrastructure, among others. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, ADB has provided the Philippines with additional funds of US\$2.4 billion to combat the virus. China has joined hands as well with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to provide financial assistance to the Philippines and other Asia-Pacific countries under the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund.

In late 2021, observers began airing concerns of Duterte's economic pivot to China having mixed results: Philippine-Chinese trade ties grew but China's BRI-BBB program had not lived up to the initial fanfare. An analyst said, "Both China and the Philippines oversold their partnership, raising expectations for the Philippine public that were unfulfilled ([International Crisis Group, 2021](#))."

For Professor Anna Malindog-Uy and her group Association for Philippines-China Friendship, however, there were many things to celebrate. In January 2022, they co-organized with

the Chinese Embassy the 5th Manila Forum for Philippines-China relations as a tribute to and commemoration of the relations, as well as a celebration of some of the tangible gains for the Philippines. These included the relief and rehabilitation assistance for Typhoon Odette survivors from the Chinese entities (government, embassy, and Filipino Chinese Community Calamity Fund), banana trade placing the Philippines as China's top banana supplier at the moment; China's donation of CNY 130 million (about US\$18 million) worth of military equipment; China's US\$2.7-billion ODA loan for the Philippine National Railway Bicol project, the around 63,000 local jobs created by Chinese companies in the infrastructure and transport sector, and the upgrading of the Philippines-China relations to "comprehensive strategic cooperation."

THE PERILS OF POGOs

While infrastructure developments had indeed been measly and China did not figure in the top country sources of FDI (or of ODA, as China does not want its foreign assistance to be classified as ODA), "the Philippines is awash with Chinese money" in various modalities, such as special-purpose vehicles and flexible capital mostly in the online gambling sector, wrote academics Alvin Camba and Rongchen Jiang in an [April 2022 piece](#) for the online publication The Diplomat.

According to Camba and Jiang, emphasizing China's huge pledges and big-ticket projects that did not actualize under Duterte obfuscates the different modalities of Chinese capital such as special purpose vehicles, FDIs, and flexible capital. They stressed that Duterte and his oligarch allies encouraged Chinese policy banks, central state-owned enterprises, and major private firms to operate or invest in the Philippines.

Chinese FDI did soar under Duterte's watch, but not exactly for the right purposes. Philippine offshore gaming operators (POGOs) became among its four recipients, triggering a slew of what Camba and Jiang describe as "unintended socioeconomic spillovers."¹³

POGOs have existed in the Philippines since 2003 under the Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo presidency but were legalized only under the Duterte administration.

On Duterte's cue, the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR) allowed the sale of gaming licenses even outside special economic zones in 2016. This came after Duterte directed PAGCOR to end its 13-year contract with PhilWeb, then the government's supplier of electronic gaming software. Roberto V. Ongpin, reputed crony and former trade minister of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. controlled and owned PhilWeb at the time, with virtual monopoly over online-gaming operations. Duterte had early on made a vow to "destroy the oligarchs that are embedded in government" and put an end to online gambling.

With PhilWeb out of the picture, PAGCOR regained its power to sell gaming licenses. Despite China's expressed opposition to opening POGOs, Duterte reportedly told then PAGCOR chief Andrea Domingo, "[Magpasugal ka pa nang marami \(Push gambling some more\).](#)"

Before the pandemic, [at least 61 POGOs](#), mostly from China or funded with China money, had secured licenses from PAGCOR. By May 2022, PAGCOR said that 31 out of 40 POGOs that were still in the country had been allowed to operate, while the rest had ceased operation.

POGOs operate thus: players abroad place bets through service providers based in the Philippines. They install the IT systems for the games, and PAGCOR only collects licensing fees.

Apart from the licensing fees, the Bureau of Internal Revenue in 2017 imposed a five-percent franchise tax on POGO local providers, and income taxes on POGO employees who are believed to be mostly illegal or undocumented Chinese workers. In 2020, taxes from POGOs amounted to only PHP 7.18 billion (about US\$130 million), or 11 percent more than collections in 2019.

It was only on 23 September 2021, however, when Duterte signed [a law taxing POGOs](#) supposedly, according to his spokesperson, as "part of our effort to tightly regulate all kinds of gambling."

Duterte then ordered PAGCOR to shut down POGOs with tax deficiencies, prompting several to close shop. But in July 2021, Duterte said that he wanted online casinos to come back to raise more taxes for government. In a televised message, he said, "[Now, why did I allow gambling? It's because we don't have money.](#) The most sensible thing is really just to encourage those activities (gambling), though it may sound not really repulsive but maybe repugnant to some."

To many observers, though, the social and economic costs of POGOs outweigh its much-trumpeted economic benefits to the Philippines. The Chinese Embassy Manila itself said that POGOs have led to more crimes and social problems in China, blamed unnamed "Chinese companies" and Filipino individuals behind them, and warned that it would take actions to prevent cross-border gambling ([Fenol, 2019](#)). China had actually cancelled the passports and ordered the deportation of hundreds of its nationals as part of its intensified drive against illegal overseas online activities ([Robles, 2020](#)).

The Philippine National Police recorded 38 POGO-related crimes from January to October 2022 alone ([Fernandez D., 2022](#)), including 16 kidnap-for-ransom cases and five trafficking in persons. The Justice Department said that it would deport 40,000 POGO employees

([Reuters, 2022](#)), but the Bureau of Immigration seemed clueless as to their whereabouts ([Fernandez D., 2022](#)).

[Official documents](#) of PAGCOR as of 28 February 2023 lists 34 approved POGO operators, 117 accredited service providers, five “special class of BPO,” six gaming laboratories, two probity checkers, and six training program providers.

Per Bureau of Immigration data, the number of Chinese nationals that had entered the Philippines increased by over three million or 538 percent [from 2016 to 2018](#) ([Beltran, 2019](#)).

BEIJING AND DUTERTE’S WAR ON DRUGS

Police brutality and abuse of power, planting of evidence and tampering crime scenes, falsification of death certificates, staged arrests and murders, extrajudicial killings and its psycho-social effect on families, especially children – these are the tragic results of Duterte’s war on illegal drugs.

On his ascent as president, Duterte had promised to end the drug menace in six months, as well as to combat crime and corruption. By official count, up to 6,500 had been killed in police operations against mostly suspected users and a few alleged pushers and syndicates. But rights advocates have documented that as many as 30,000 people had died from the drug war, including those felled by the police and vigilante groups believed to be working with the police.

From 2016 to 2018, the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) said, China was the main source of meth, meth ingredients/precursors, and meth experts (who fly in as tourists or businessmen) in the Philippines ([Chalmers J., 2016](#); [Inquirer.net, 2018](#)); and of foreign nationals arrested for meth-related drug offenses from January 2015 to mid-August 2016. Moreover, almost all the clandestine meth laboratories uncovered by police in the Philippines over the past 20 years have been run by, or at least involved, Chinese nationals.

PDEA, PNP, and DOJ officials describe meth and meth precursors trafficking to the Philippines to be well-entrenched and controlled by small, tight-knit groups of Chinese (e.g. Triads, the ruthless criminal syndicates that have long been in drug trafficking) who oversee the entire process from the procurement of precursors in China, to the production of the drug in the Philippines to distribution by local gangs.¹⁴

Number of Chinese nationals vis-à-vis foreign nationals arrested

PDEA Annual Reports 2016-2022

2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total number of suspects arrested					
28,056	75,008	48,077	62,082	49,234	50,565
Number of Chinese over number of foreign nationals arrested					
44/112 (39%)	8/28 (29%)	19/56 (60%)	14/59	34/73 (47%)	24/55
Offense					
Pushers, possessors, drug den visitors	Pushers, possessors	Pushers, possessors, lab/warehouse workers, chemists	Pushers, possessors, manufacturers	-	-

Duterte had raised the issue ([Ranada P., 2016](#)) and even urged China to act on it – even as he praised China for not criticizing and quietly helping him in his war on drugs.¹⁵ Duterte later said that it was unfair to hold Beijing responsible for the Philippines’ drug problem since the triads are not run by its government officials and that not all Chinese are related to drugs.

Responding to criticisms that “China has done little over the years” to stem the flow of meth and its precursors, Duterte said that in October 2016, Xi Jinping had signed a cooperation agreement with the Philippines while about 50 police officers had attended a drug enforcement training in Yunnan ([Chalmers J., 2016](#)).

By November 2019, PDEA would tell the media that the strict anti-drug laws in China forced the triads to outsource their production and operations in other countries ([Macapagal, 2019](#)), and then by 2022, that China being the Philippines’ main source of meth was just a misconception.

In an interview, lawyer Jacquelyn de Guzman, PDEA Director for International Cooperation and Foreign Affairs Service (ICFAS), said: “It’s a common misconception because a lot of foreigners arrested are Chinese. In 2021, 24 of the 55 were Chinese. There were several Chinese, who possessed quite an amount of drugs, (who) were killed during operations. And the drugs are packaged in Chinese tea bags, but they are really from Myanmar.”

But as for other psychotropic substances, de Guzman added: “China is more lenient because it is a manufacturing country, so they have chemicals and precursors. A lot are available and legal in China because they use them in a lot of manufacturing sites, warehouses and plantations, but the other chemicals get diverted, and are not made there. They are made in Myanmar.”

According to the PDEA official, Manila’s cooperation with Beijing in controlling illicit drugs has always been “vibrant.” “Even before the Duterte administration, the relation on drug law enforcement with China has been quite strong because we had agreements with them on how to proceed with anti-drug matters – criminality in general,” she said. “We have an extradition treaty with them. We have a vibrant relationship with their National Narcotics Control Commission. So even before the Duterte administration, we, specifically PDEA, have a very vibrant relationship with them.”

Meth from the Mainland

Major trafficking routes and production areas of crystal methamphetamine in Asia



Two things are not contested, though: clear support from China for Duterte's war on drugs, and conversely, Duterte's support for China.

As early as July 2016, Lingxiao Li, Chinese Embassy in Manila spokesperson, expressed China's support¹⁶ for Duterte's war on drugs. Duterte later thanked China for helping build at least four mega drug rehabilitation and treatment centers that would already be ready by the following year – one each in the Visayas and Mindanao, and two in Luzon.¹⁷

During Duterte's state visit to China in October 2016, no less than Xi expressed support in a joint statement he signed with Duterte. The statement read in part: "China understands and supports Philippine Government's efforts in fighting against illicit drugs. Realizing that the problem of illicit drugs poses severe threats to the health, safety, and welfare of the peoples of both countries, both sides agree to enhance exchange of intelligence, know-how and technology sharing on fighting against drug crimes, preventive education, and rehabilitation facilities."

"To further strengthen the efforts to fight against illicit drugs, both sides agree to establish operation mechanism for joint investigation on special cases and intelligence collection purposes," the statement also said. "The Philippines thanks China for its offer of assistance in personnel training and donation of drug detection, seizure, and testing equipment to aid in the fight against illicit drugs."

Apart from the statement, Manila and Beijing also signed more agreements on bilateral cooperation in light of the war on drugs.

- **The five-year MOU on the Protocol on Cooperation between the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) and the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) of China** (signed by Directors General Isidro Lapena and Hu Minglang, respectively on 20 October 2016) to suppress and control drug crimes by:
 - Establishing and maintaining cooperation involving information, data intelligence exchange and investigation on drug crimes, assistance in the repatriation of drug criminals, exchange and training of narcotics investigators (PDEA 2019);
 - Agreeing that representatives from the Bureau of Customs (BOC) and the PDEA [share information and technology](#) with the Fujian Provincial Drug Enforcement Agency as part of the initiatives to stop the smuggling of illegal drugs; and
 - Information-sharing, including an updated list and complete profile of drug suspects and status of arrested drug personalities who are citizens of each country (Felongco 2016).

- **Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation, signed by Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez III and Chinese Commerce Minister Gao Hucheng**, which read: “In accordance with the needs of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines, the Government of the People’s Republic of China agrees to provide the Government of the Philippines with a grant of RMB Yuan 100,000,000 which shall be disbursed to implement the projects for anti-illegal drugs and law enforcement security cooperation.” The project specifics of the agreement, which amount is equivalent to almost US\$15 million or PHP 714.57 million, will be stipulated in subsequent agreements (GMA News 2016).

PDEA lawyer de Guzman said that “during the Duterte administration, PDEA was one of the parties (that) joined the President when he visited Chinese President Xi Jinping and signed the Protocol on Cooperation between PDEA and the China National Narcotics Control Bureau. That was when everything was written down – this is how we cooperate, this is how we exchange information, these are our protocols. And then we had several meetings afterwards – every year thereafter. Until now the cooperation is very vibrant.”

Asked who initiated the agreement, de Guzman said, “The protocol was a bilateral agreement. It was agreed on by both parties to address each other’s concerns and enter into a protocol. This is common among law-enforcement units... It maybe as a result of that (the President’s strong pronouncements and calls), but it was also a result of a longstanding cooperation. We had a Memorandum of Understanding with them in 2001. There was no PDEA yet that time. We were created in 2002. But I was part of the previous agency that was part of it and I saw how it worked. It (the cooperation) has been working even before.”

According to de Guzman, “exchange of information” tops the terms of cooperation. “Exchange of information is number one,” she said. “They give us information on possible offenses that will be committed here that has relation to China, e.g. Chinese authorities intercept a package bound for the Philippines, they inform us so when it arrives here we know what to do.”

Yet another involves monitoring of persons of interests. “If there are common Chinese nationals that we’re looking for that they’re monitoring and asking us to monitor (these people who may) possibly do some illicit activities here related to drug trafficking...we exchange information,” she said. “The same is true with us, if we’re monitoring a Chinese national doing something illegal here in the Philippines, we ask them for additional details that will help in the investigation.”

Training seminars are yet a third. From 2008 to 2022, de Guzman said that “in almost if not every single year, there were several in a span of one year. We have sent people for training – 21 training already. The training ranges from drug enforcement training course,

language course on Mandarin, cultural exposures, general courses on law enforcement, Chinese language and culture, several others.”

She said that in 2019, she was part of the delegation that visited Yunnan Police College for two weeks, “learning about their culture their basic language, and how they deal with their own anti-drug problem China has been here for so many years, so they have a lot of lessons imparted on us.”

In addition, the agreement includes the conduct of bilateral meetings on “common concerns and common targets,” donation of some technology (e.g. liquid mass combination instrument equipment for the PDEA laboratory, masks and PPEs, mostly laboratory equipment); and conduct of “shared drug profiling, drug impurity profiling.”

“There may be signatures on certain items confiscated that will tell you where it’s coming from,” said de Guzman. “That’s why I’m confident in telling you that the drugs are coming from Myanmar because there is scientific basis to it – signature, packaging, contents, the profile appears to be from that area. China is not the only source – you have South America, Mexico, Afghanistan for Afghan meth. But the source of those in the Philippines is Myanmar.”

And so while Duterte’s war on drugs attracted only criticism and condemnation have come from Western countries, it could count on China’s support, which came in the form of statements, grants/donations, and continued implementation of the anti-narcotics co-operation agreement.

In 2016, China’s foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said, “We understand and support the Philippines’ policies to combat drugs under the leadership of President Duterte,”¹⁸ adding that Duterte, during his China visit, would participate in relevant anti-drug related activities.¹⁹

Philippine foreign affairs department spokesman Charles Jose confirmed that the President was due to tentatively visit China’s anti-drugs agency and get an idea of how China was tackling its own narcotics problems.²⁰ During the same trip, China also pledged PHP 700 million (US\$14 million) for new detention facilities in light of the worsening of the already severe congestion of Philippine jails as a result of the intensified crackdowns.²¹

In December 2020, Chinese Ambassador Zhao Jianhua confirmed that “we’re exploring the possibilities of providing arms...for fighting against terrorism, (for the) anti-drug campaign,” which, according to Duterte would be “a grant payable in 25 years so it is practically giving.”²²

China is said to have some of the most “repressive” drug policies in the world and has executed more people for drug offenses than any other country ([Muller-Baum, 2016](#)).

According to de Guzman, “they are really very strict with their anti-drug campaign. In their airports, which we’re starting to do here and we’re grateful to (the Bureau of) Customs, they have monitoring of their hubs of what comes in and out of China. They are excellent at detection. Not a lot of people enter Chinese territory. With the help of technology, and their legal system, which again differs from ours, they can easily examine packages and luggage.”

De Guzman is apparently impressed with how China deals with illegal drugs and suspects. “If here we are already happy about hundreds of kilos of seized drugs, know that in China they seize tons,” she said. “We cannot do that here because of democratic restrictions and because we value the rights of the people. Not that they don’t. They really just have a different legal system... They can hold suspects for 14 days or more before filing a case. They are allowed to listen to communication between suspects. They can do surveillance and at the same time know who people under surveillance are talking to and what they are talking about. Again, they have a different legal system and investigation process.” Of these, one thing that she said PDEA wishes to do is to look into communication between and among drug actors: “I don’t know how Congress will react to it, but we want to be able to look into communications between people engaged in drugs, but again we have the Data Privacy Act and other laws.”

PDEA, however, has so far done nothing for that wish to come true. Explained de Guzman: “There is none so far (proposal in Congress). It’s on our wish list, yes, but it’s a difficult balance between protecting rights and enforcing the law on drugs because even if the law has no intent to use if for other things, it can make citizens wary about possible infringement of their rights.”

As it was, Duterte’s drug war was already raising concerns not only among many Filipinos. On 19 June 2018, member-states of the United Nations issued a collective statement calling on the Philippine president to stop the killings and to investigate abuses in relation to the war on drugs.

On 11 July 2019, Iceland proposed a UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) resolution to investigate the drug war and human-rights situation in the Philippines. The resolution passed with a vote of 18 countries in favor, 15 abstentions, and 14 against, including China (Reuters, et al 2019).

China, in statement at the 44th session of the UNHRC in June 2020, expressed support anew for Duterte’s drug war, and even urged the UN to stop its “prejudice.” It expressed a positive assessment of the Duterte administration’s efforts in “promoting economic develop-

ment, eliminating poverty, and ensuring people’s human rights,” adding that it “support(s) the Philippine government’s law enforcement actions to fight drug crimes and maintain its security and social order.”

Asked if China has ever brought up human-rights concerns at any point in any of the various forms of cooperation, PDEA’s de Guzman said: “It’s not part of the training program because they respect our sovereignty in dealing with their concerns, and vice versa. Again, we have different legal systems. In our case, our citizens enjoy many rights and that’s fine because that is what’s in our Constitution. We don’t talk about it. That’s already internal, so they don’t ask us.”

PDEA’s Cooperation Agreements and Activities

YEAR	COOPERATION/PARTNERSHIP
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - MOU/Protocol on Cooperation between PDEA, Philippines and NCB, MPS, People’s Republic of China (Oct 20, 2016, Beijing) - (non-state) MOA with Chinese General Hospital-Philippine Chinese Charitable Association, Inc. (PCCAI) signed in Manila on 13 Oct 2016
2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - agreed minutes of the 1st Bilateral Meeting between PDEA and NCB MPS (3 Mar)
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - agreed minutes of the 2nd Bilateral Meeting between PDEA and NCB MPS (9 May) - (non-state) Renewal of MOA with the PCCAI
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - agreed minutes of the 3rd Bilateral Meeting between PDEA and NCB MPS (21 May)
YEAR	VISITS AND COURTESY CALLS
2016	Courtesy Call of PRC on 28 Jul
2017	Courtesy Call of Director General Chen Kuo-En, National Police Agency of Taiwan (the Republic of China) on 8 Aug 2017; Visit from First Institute of Ministry of Public Security of PRC Beijing XWAT Wireless Communication Technology Co. Ltd. on 4 Dec 2017
2018	Courtesy Call of the Embassy of the PRC on 14 Aug
2019	Liu Gonghua, President, and delegates from Yunnan Police College (14 Jan) National Narcotics Control Commission-Ministry of Public Security (NNCC) and China Central Television (7-11 Mar) Mr. Chen Chao, Police Attache, Embassy of the PRC (18 Jul) Mr. Chen Chao, Police Attache and Mr. Li Le, Deputy Police Attache, Embassy of the PRC (2 Sep) Mr. Wang Yong, Deputy Director General, Ningxia Provincial Public Security Department (11 Dec)
YEAR	TRAINING, MEETINGS, AND CONFERENCES
2016	Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visit to Beijing, China (16-21 Oct) sponsored by Ministry of Public Security of China

PDEA's Cooperation Agreements and Activities

YEAR	TRAINING, MEETINGS, AND CONFERENCES
2017	<p>Training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training Course on Law Enforcement (13-28 Oct, Fuzhou City, China) - Advanced Training Course on China-ASEAN Rule of Law Cooperation over Drug Issue and other Unconventional Safety Problems (20 Nov- 19 Dec, Chongqing, China) - 3rd Post Graduate Education Program on Policing (1 Sept 2017 to 1 Aug 2019, Fuzhou City, China) <p>Meetings and Conferences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ad hoc Technical Meeting between ASEAN and China (17-19 May, Guiyang, China) - 3rd Postgraduate Education Program on Policing (1 Sept -1 Aug, Fuzhou City, China) <p>Bilateral Meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Joint investigation/official visit of the Office of National Narcotics Control Commission (ONNCC), Ministry of Public Security; and Guangdong Provincial Drug Law Enforcement Agency (13-17 Feb, Philippines) - Joint Investigation with ONNCC and Fujian Provincial Drug Law Enforcement Agency (20 Feb-9 Mar, Philippines) - 1st Bilateral Meeting on Drug Control Cooperation with ONNCC, Ministry of Public Security (3 Mar, QC Philippines) - Bilateral Meeting with Mr. Liang Yun, Executive Secretary General/Director General NNCC, NCB, MPS (16 Mar, Vienna, Austria) - with Anti-Smuggling of Bureau of Xiamen Customs (21 Jun, Philippines)
2018	<p>Training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drug Profiling Training Course (14-27 Jan), China National Narcotics Laboratory, Beijing, China - Installation of and Training on the Liquid Chromatography Mass Spectrum (LCMS) (6-20 Sept), PDEA National Headquarters, Philippines - Scholarship Program for Chinese Culture and Language – China (13 Sep 2018-Jul 2019), Huaqiao University of China <p>Bilateral Meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - With Ministry of Public Safety, PRC (no date indicated) - 2nd Bilateral Meeting on Drug Control Cooperation (7-11 May, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province)
2019	<p>Meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drug Forensic Specialist Meeting in Beijing (10-12 Dec) <p>Training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visit and Lecture by the delegation of Professors from Yunnan Police College (14-19 Jan), PDEA NHQ, Philippines - Training Course on Anti-Drug Law Enforcement (May 13-26), Yunnan Police College, China - 10-month Training Program on Chinese Language Scholarship and Culture in Yunnan (3 Sept 2019-Jun 2020), Huaqiao University of China - Golden Shield Scholarship Program for International Police Master Students (30 Oct 2019-5 Jul 2021), Yunnan Police College
	<p>Bilateral Meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3rd Bilateral Meeting on Drug Control Cooperation (20-23 May, Tagbilaran, Bohol, Philippines)

PDEA Cooperation Agreements, Activities with China

YEAR	TRAINING, MEETINGS, AND CONFERENCES
2021	Training - Chinese Culture and Language Training Sept 2021-Jul 2022 (in-country in Annual Report but PDEA-provided list says Huaquiao University of China) - Seminar on Drug Control Dec (20-23 Dec), in-country, online
2022	Training - Seminar on Drug Control for Developing Countries (11-15 Jul), online

Sources: PDEA Annual Reports 2016-2021 and PDEA-provided list of agreements, training/meeting/conferences, and donations sponsored by China

Donations from China

DONATED EQUIPMENT	
*	Epidemic prevention materials worth RMB 62,550 Yuan 10,000 masks (8,000 disposable medical masks and 2,000 efficient filtering masks) 500 pairs of eye-protector 4,000 medical vinyl examination gloves 50 infrared thermometers
*	(2 sets) Liquid Mass Combination Instrument equipment for Laboratory Service worth Chinese Yuan

Source: PDEA-provided list of agreements, training/meeting/conferences, and donations sponsored by China

Apart from the Chinese government, a Chinese tycoon funded a huge rehabilitation center in a military base in a province north of Metro Manila. The facility was designed to support 10,000 drug users (Reuters 2016).

De Guzman said that the Filipino-Chinese Chamber of Commerce had also donated body cameras for their agents, while several other business groups gave mostly PPEs during the pandemic. She said the donations might have been given because these businessmen do not want to be mistaken of being involved in the drug problem.

The Chinese General Hospital-Philippine Chinese Charitable Institution, Inc. has a memorandum of agreement with PDEA for free comprehensive medical assistance for PDEA agents. It was first signed in 13 October 2016 and renewed in December 2017. The MOA covers “medical aid and treatment of PDEA personnel nationwide who sustained injuries in line of duty or actual performance of duties, including surgery and major operations as well as the use of its medical equipment and facilities from admission to release” (PDEA 2017).

What does Marcos Jr. have to say about Duterte's war on drugs?

Academic and newspaper columnist Richard Heydarian has observed that Marcos Jr, in an attempt to rebrand the Philippines, has partly disowned the worst aspects of his predecessor's policies, the war on drugs included.

Marcos Jr. has been quoted as saying, "His people went too far sometimes," referring to allegations of excesses under Duterte's controversial drug war. In another instance, though, Marcos Jr. said, "We have seen many cases where policemen, other operatives, some were just shady characters that we didn't quite know where they came from and who they were working for."²³

For Human Rights Watch Asia senior researcher Carlos Conde, however, the only thing that changed with Marcos Jr. was the [tone](#) and to some extent the substance of his pronouncements on the issue; in reality, people still do get killed. Indeed, by Marcos Jr.'s sixth month, the number of killings had already [surpassed](#) that during Duterte's last six months in office. Worse, Marcos Jr refused to cooperate with the International Criminal Court (ICC) and even [threatened](#) to cut off communications with the body if it continued to investigate Duterte.

DIPLOMACY VIA VACCINES

The Duterte administration has been widely slammed and even [sued](#) by groups of doctors and scientists for its militarized, [unconstitutional, and unscientific](#) response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Duterte threatened critics, implemented curfews and one of the longest²⁴ lockdowns in the world, forced vaccination, and imposed 'unscientific' protocols such as the use of plastic barriers, disproportionate and dehumanizing punishments for protocol violations, censorship and dismissal of vaccine-related concerns, and massive deployment of police and military ([Santos Manila, 2020](#)).

These were Duterte's own words: "My orders to the police and military...if there is trouble or the situation arises where your life is on the line, shoot them dead. Understand? Dead. I'll send you to the grave. ... Don't test the government." Two days after he uttered these statements, a 63-year-old farmer was shot dead in Mindanao after reportedly refusing to wear a face mask; prior to Duterte's death threat, though, there had already been reports of rampant police abuses of power ([Billing, 2020](#)).

For Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Huang Xilian, however, the fight against COVID-19 best exemplified China-Philippines friendship, and this is a story that China has made sure is repeatedly told in the Philippines. A 2021 statement from the Chinese Embassy in Manila said, "At the height of China's battle with COVID-19, the Philippine government and people from all walks of life provided valued support and assistance to China. In

light of the pandemic situation in the Philippines, China has also extended every help and support to the Philippines to the best of its ability. We have promptly provided well-needed medical supplies to the Philippines, and shared our hard-earned experience and dispatched an anti-pandemic medical expert team to the Philippines.”

China is not modest at all about the help it gives its so-called friends. The statement continued: “Together with our Filipino friends, many memorable ‘firsts’ were recorded. China was the first country to donate test kits, the first and the only country to dispatch anti-pandemic medical expert team to the Philippines, and also the first country to issue special permit for the Philippine military air crafts and vessels to land and dock in China for the transportation of medical supplies. China’s Sinovac was the first Covid vaccine to arrive in the Philippines both through government-to-government donation and commercial procurement, and it now tops the list of most welcomed and trusted Covid vaccines among Filipinos.”

Financially, there was China’s support of the AIIB in approving nearly US\$1.3-billion loans to the Philippines that had part of it allotted for the country’s COVID-19 response. It also teamed up with UNDP to provide financial assistance to the Philippines and other Asia-Pacific countries under the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund (Xilian 2021).

Dr. Joel Buenaventura, Division Chief at the Department of Health’s (DOH) Bureau of International Health Cooperation, described how and when Philippines-China cooperation in health unfolded: “These days, it’s very obvious, but pre-pandemic, there was almost none. China aid is very recent, almost nil. We have cooperation but I would call it very transactional, i.e., if there is an invitation from China, say a ministerial that they’re organizing, they would contact the DFA, and DFA would contact us because it’s on health – something like that. But not in an official capacity.”

“But at some point, around 2016, we started sitting down on a memorandum of understanding,” he said. “It’s just like a handshake on some areas of cooperation and that’s not signed.”

The initiative was “overtaken by the pandemic,” Buenaventura said. “It’s usually bilateral – the leaders talk in a visit and they if they mention about health, it goes down (to us). I’m not sure who initiated it, but the MOU is between the National Health Commission of China and the DOH of the Philippines... Then the leaders will task the MOHs to coordinate...and facilitated by the DFA primarily.”

He added, “The rest are under the ambit of ASEAN-China, which is ASEAN-China initiative, plus all those Silk Road Initiatives. But those are mainly attending to meetings and the like. The cooperation under ASEAN is on traditional and complementary medicine (TCM), infectious diseases, non-communicable. I think there are some areas of cooperation. More of forum. They also support exchange programs, especially on their strength, which is TCM.”

In a 2021 paper, foreign affairs and security analyst Lucio Pitlo III noted that Duterte's preference for Chinese vaccines and China's vaccine diplomacy worried local and international actors that Beijing may leverage its dose donations to deepen its influence among recipients. Philippine opposition figures cited a possible linkage between the territorial dispute and the vaccine shipments, while China's rivals were compelled to step up their vaccine donations sooner.

But Pitlo pointed out that the influx of Chinese vaccines were not due simply to China leveraging its power and Duterte having personal preference for them. Other factors included:

- Western governments were prioritizing their own vaccine needs;
- Sinovac did not require an indemnification clause before delivering supplies (Western firms demanded immunity from suits and liabilities and for the host government to indemnify patients who might suffer adverse events post-inoculation);
- Duterte also criticized Western firms for requiring advance payments in the middle of a global health emergency;
- Unlike Pfizer and Moderna, Sinovac had less demanding storage requirements, which contributed to its supply peaking to 11 million by August 2020 or an average of five million doses per month;
- Sinovac's openness toward technology licensing or co-production to supply domestic needs;
- Beijing permitted exports as early as May 2020, even before substantive progress in domestic vaccination, unlike other donors whose donations came in late and from their surplus.

All these notwithstanding, Chinese vaccine developers were not exempted from complying with the requirements and procedures. The lack of transparency in prices, however, fuelled allegations of overpricing, if not perception of the Philippine government's failure to negotiate better rates. There were suspicions as well of "disaster opportunism" as China continued activities in the contested waters, such as fortifying its artificial island bases; challenging routine patrols, resource activities, and efforts by other claimants to upgrade facilities in features they occupy; and enforcing new regulations such as an expansive unilateral fishing ban and a coast guard law that greenlights the use of force against foreign vessels (Pitlo 2021). This can be seen in lawmakers' call to continue protesting Chinese intrusions into Philippine waters and the Filipino public's negative feedback to China's pandemic-era solidarity music video "Iisang Dagat (One Sea)" (Pitlo, 2021).

In truth, Duterte's apparent preference for, and favorable treatment of, China made the Philippines a COVID-19 hotspot. Duterte had at first downplayed the virus, kept Philippine borders open to travelers from Wuhan, and did not act on the pandemic until accelerated transmission had occurred. Then Health Secretary Francisco Duque III backpedaled

on the use of inaccurate testing kits upon the Chinese Embassy's calling his remark "irresponsible" (Valenzuela, 2020). The Philippines imposed a travel ban only nearly two weeks after China detected its first case. The ban lasted just two days, from 13 to 15 January 2020. The delay, according to Duque, was the lack of confirmation from international agencies at the time (Ranada, 2021).

Manila's cozy relations with Beijing, however, made the Philippines a key beneficiary of China's global health outreach. Some saw this as a vindication of the friendly ties and enhanced China's image, forced other donors to compete, as well as allayed fears on how it will be leveraged in the territorial dispute (Pitlo 2021).

Duterte himself, in his Final Report 2016-2021, said that improved relations resulted, among others, in COVID-19 pandemic assistance not only from the Chinese government but also from local authorities and private entities. Assistance ranged from in-kind (ventilators, face masks, PPEs, medical equipment and supplies) to vaccines, as well as to sharing of best practices and advice from Chinese medical experts who came for a two-week mission in April 2020.

Upon the request of the Philippine government, the Anti-Epidemic Medical Expert Team arrived in Manila on 5 April 2020. This team was among the first three teams sent by the Chinese government and met with DOH officials, staff of the Incident Command System and the officers of WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific to exchange experience and practice; visited more than 10 frontline medical agencies; and held a number of video lectures on epidemic prevention and personal protection to 50,000 people in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao (Santarita 2021).

Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Huang said that they sent the team, most of whom had their frontline experiences in Wuhan, to "exchange experience and practice, with the aim to further improve Philippines' epidemic prevention and control policies and enhance diagnosis, treatment and executive ability" (Banlaoi 2021).

The teams, particularly the one that came in April, "assessed our capacity, assisted us on how they handled Wuhan," said Buenaventura. "That was more like sharing of experiences, learning what the Chinese did...There were a lot of very technical discussions. They visited RITM, our quarantine facilities, those things that we were establishing." The DOH official also said that there was an initial session, various technical sessions, and an exit conference.

On whether the much-decried mass lockdowns and quarantines were part of the Chinese medical team's recommendations, Buenaventura said, "That was definitely part of the discussion, but I'm not privy to the decision-making. That's also the IATF. But I think there was some feedback that was given to the IATF that eventually, probably, came out from their

recommendation of the Chinese. What I can say is that at that time we didn't know (about the nature of the virus) ..."

"At that time, most likely, because they were the ones who were the most experienced, because they were the ones who handled it," he said. "The (local) implementers during that time learned a thing or two from them and maybe used that. But I can say that obviously because our systems are not the same, there were some things that they said weren't applicable. China uses draconian rule, doesn't it?"

State and Non-State/Private Donors (and their Donations/Support)

Early 2020	Chinese Embassy + China Mammoth Foundation donated 2,000 test kits to the Philippine government; Chinese government donated three batches of medical supplies including 252,000 test kits, 130 ventilators, and 1,870,000 surgical masks
March 2020	Arrival of 600,000 doses of Sinovac's Coronavac began in early March; second batch of 400,000 jabs arrived later in the same month (Pitlo 2020); additional 120,500 kits from different countries including China ; 4,167 RT-PCR test kits (equivalent to 100,000 tests); 10,000 pcs of N95 masks; 100,000 pcs of surgical masks; and 10,000 protective suits from China
23 April 2020	US\$2.5 million worth of medical equipment from Beijing Genomics Institute (BGI) Group (Banlaoi 2021)
30 April 2020	Philippines International Chamber of Commerce and the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry organized the Vaccine Summit in Manila
May 2020	Chinese Ministry of National Defense donated a batch of emergency medical supplies: 80,000 pcs medical surgical masks, PPEs, and protective goggles; China provided utmost facilitation of the flight and transportation permits of Philippine military aircraft State Grid Corporation of China handed over 500,000 medical masks to the Philippine Red Cross; ; nearly three million medical items (2.65 million medical masks and 250,000 pcs of other medical supplies such as protective suits, gloves, goggles, daily necessities) and cash worth PHP10 million (US\$182,000)
Jun 2020	Chinese Embassy and FCCCII donated 20,000 Friendship Bags of rice and canned sardines. Chinese Embassy and Consulates General in Cebu, Davao, and Laoag donated supplies of daily necessities worth PHP 17.5 million (US\$319,000) 3,075 million kilograms of rice were also donated to over 500,000 families Chinese Embassy donated friendship bags to Concordia Children's Services, Inc. containing daily necessities such as rice and canned food, and panda dolls and Zongzi.
	SGCC, Bank of China, Panhua Group, China Information Communication Technology Group, Power Construction Corporation of China, China Road and Bridge Corporation, China Railway Design Corporation, China Geo-Engineering Corporation, China State Construction Engineering Corporation, China Energy Engineering Corporation, Qingjian Group

State and Non-State/Private Donors (and their Donations/Support)

	National Grid Corporation donated PHP 1 billion (US\$18.2 million) to the Philippine government
	Dito Telecommunity, co-owned by China Telecom, donated 375,000kg of rice to the local governments
	Zhejiang Dahua Technology donated thermal temperature monitoring solution
	Huawei provided technical diagnosis and treatment system using remote CT scans in Baguio General Hospital Medical Center
	Chinese multinational Jack Ma through his Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation donated 100,000 test kits and 500,000 medical masks.
	TikTok donated US\$1 million to PGH Medical Foundation
	51talk donated medical supplies worth PHP 5.25 million (US\$95,600),
	Chinese embassy donated PHP 1 million (US\$18,200) cash and some PPEs to the medical frontliners
<i>Note: some dates and recipients not specified</i>	Other donors of large quantities of medical supplies: Hong Kong Prudential Enterprise; local authorities of Fujian, Hainan, Shangdong, Guangzhou, Nanning, and others donated to their sister provinces/cities such as Ilocos Norte, Manila, Cebu City, and Davao City (Banlaoi 2021)

Sources: Pitlo 2020, Banlaoi 2021, Santarita 2021

China locked down Wuhan on 23 January 2020 and shifted to emergency mode. China's pandemic response characterized by mass lockdowns, quarantine, and surveillance would become the world's model in handling the pandemic for a significant length of time. Duterte's critics said that the already militaristic Philippine leader saw this as an opportunity to further weaponize the state – vesting himself with unlimited emergency powers, appointing retired army generals to pandemic task forces, imposing total lockdowns, harsh punishments for quarantine violators, and forcing Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccines on the entire population, thereby depriving people of basic social services, medical and other constitutional freedoms and rights, and livelihoods while enriching officials and businesses through corruption in the purchase of medical supplies, among others.

For DOH's Buenaventura, who was part of the emergency operation center, militarization was inevitable “when it came to a point when we suddenly had so many cases, when we had our first long wave. We knew that it's not just health. It should be a whole-of-government approach. That's what they call militarization. Because at some point, you had to transport everything – the masks, the PPEs, and all. But the DOH does not have helicopters, we don't have ships. That's why that's your logical choice. That's how I thought about the takeover.”

“Actually,” he said, “health was always the prime consideration. Duque was there, we got experts, the military was really talking to the experts. They didn't move until they got advice from the experts. All the decisions they made were I think somehow based on science.”

“Of course, there’s the politics in it,” Buenaventura conceded. “But for me, I think a lot of countries also used the military. Because for me, it’s a whole-of-government approach. I didn’t think that the DOH moved back. No. We still had the IATF, I think. It’s just that the implementer is the military. But they get orders from us, they get guidance from the DOH. I think it’s a management decision during that time. You have the health side that was so overburdened, right? Who will help the health side? That’s why the Office of the President stepped in, (Karlo) Nograles, the head of IATF, because it was beyond health.”

What were these pandemic assistances’ influences on the Philippines and gains for China? For the Philippines, it was a learning experience; for China, it was its redeemed image, which took hits for being the geographical origin of the virus.

Sending medical teams was, for Buenaventura in particular “a bold diplomatic move by China,” a “drastic step” to save its image after failing to contain the virus in Wuhan and not providing the international community with all the much-needed information at the right time. “Remember in the initial phase, we had to send our samples to Australia – that was months after (the outbreak) so there was a lag,” Buenaventura said. Nevertheless, he said, “it somehow signified that China was willing to help...and it was actually also welcome for us because we didn’t know so much about the virus at that time.”

Overall, China’s early pandemic assistance has made a significant impact on the DOH’s criteria in terms of which strategic bilateral cooperations to pursue. Buenaventura said, “Prior to the pandemic, we had ideas as to how we would do our strategic bilaterals. But post-pandemic, things changed because of what happened during the pandemic. We’re in the process where we would still identify. But I think one of the major criteria that we’ll be using will be: who helped us during the pandemic. As they say, you know who your true friends are in times of crisis. Obviously, China was there during the time of crisis. That was one of the big criteria.”

“So, I think that Philippines-China health cooperation should be pursued,” said Buenaventura. “We have to think who our true friends are. Of course, there’s political everything, but as far as the health (aspect is concerned), the scientific and objective evidence is that China gave us how many million vaccines during the time we needed the most. They’re closer, they have the technology that we need...some of the technologies that we need.”

He also said that although “there has yet to be any formal health cooperation on paper and officially, it doesn’t mean that there’s nothing happening,” citing dealings with China at the ASEAN level, and recent “informal, ad hoc” talks with the Chinese CDC on forming a Philippines CDC with the help of the DFA. Said Buenaventura: “We actively asked for it. It’s the Philippine side who asked.”

The talks, however, have not been limited to China as DOH is studying the models of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCs) across the world, and has also interviewed the U.S. CDC, as well as the CDCs of South Korea and Nigeria.

Soon after he succeeded Duterte, Marcos Jr. at the awarding ceremony of the Association for Philippines-China Understanding said that the Philippines' continued partnership with China would help the country succeed in the fight against the prevailing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Heaping praise on China, he also said, "Certainly, in the Philippines we can only do it with our partners and our strongest partner has always been, in that regard, our close neighbor and our good friend, the People's Republic of China." He added that he was "optimistic" that the Philippines and China's relations would continue to improve under his watch, as he intended to grab the opportunity to "grow closer" with Beijing ([Gita-Carlos R. & Rocamora, J., 2022](#)).

"I see the future of China and the Philippines developing in many ways that maybe we do not see now," said Marcos Jr. "I will encourage our relationship to not only be in the very strict and formal senses of business, or government to government, or public-private partnerships."

Post-state visit, Marcos Jr. and Xi issued a joint statement committing the two countries to continued cooperation, "especially in the procurement of vaccines, and agreed to further promote public health cooperation in such areas as vaccine research and production. Both sides expressed support for the ASEAN Center for Public Health Emergency and Emergency Diseases ([MFA China, 2023](#))."

DESTRUCTIVE BRI/BBB PROJECTS

Much more, of course, had been on the table in Beijing. And once everything was signed and buttoned up, it was clear that for the Philippines, China remained an important source of aid, grants, direct investments, and project funds.

At the close of Marcos Jr.'s state visit to China in January 2023, he and Xi, along with other officials of both nations, signed 14 agreements including four loan agreements for "mixed-credit financing (US Dollar and Renminbi) of three priority bridge projects" of the Philippine government that Xi had promised to Duterte early on.

Marcos Jr. also reportedly secured commitments from various Chinese companies to invest up to "US\$22.8 billion and trade purchase intentions of close to US\$2.1 billion." The [commitments from Chinese investors](#) included, according to an official statement, US\$13.76 billion for renewable energy, US\$7.32 billion for electric vehicles and mineral processing, and US\$1.72 billion for agriculture.

But Marcos Jr.'s [flagship projects](#), apart from bridges, cover mostly projects in irrigation, water supply and flood management, digital connectivity, health, power and energy, agriculture, and vastly expensive railways, expressways, and airport rehabilitation.

Marcos Jr.'s immediate predecessor, Duterte, had entered into a 10-year infrastructure cooperation program with China from November 2018 to November 2028 for his ambitious 'Build, Build, Build' or BBB centerpiece development program. The agreement was supposed to serve Duterte's BBB and China's BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) programs, and would cover infrastructure projects in transportation, agriculture, power, watershed management, and ICT/telecommunications.

Under Marcos Jr., however, BBB is now old news. 'Build Better More' or 'BBM' – an acronym for both the program and Bongbong Marcos – has taken over. And it's all a bundle of some of the same projects planned but delayed under Duterte, and some new ones that Marcos Jr. wants to finish mostly before his term ends in June 2028.

Marcos Jr. has proposed under the 2023 national budget PHP 1.196 trillion (about US\$37 billion) or five percent of the forecast of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to finance 112 big-ticket "flagship: infrastructure projects.

Of the 112, at least 94 projects worth PHP 4.5 trillion (US\$82.2 billion) date back to the Duterte's BBB that are ongoing or "have been shown to be of benefit to the public that they serve."

The BBM list initially included 3,000 projects, but was trimmed to 206 in February 2023 and then to 112 in March 2023, with financing drawn from official development aid, and public-private partnership, grants, and the national budget.

For many of the unfinished projects that began under Duterte, the Philippines sees China once again as a major source of aid, grants, and project funds.

Priority Infrastructure Projects and the Role of China

TRANSPORTATION PRIORITY PROJECTS	ROLE OF CHINA
<p>Railways upgrading and expansion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Philippine National Railway South Long Haul Project - Subic-Clark Railway Project - Mindanao Railway Project - Other railway projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - share its experience in railway construction - encourage enterprises to participate in railway priorities - conduct feasibility studies for priority railways, e.g., subsequent phases of Mindanao Railway project and other proposed railway projects

PRIORITY INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS AND THE ROLE OF CHINA

TRANSPORTATION PRIORITY PROJECTS	ROLE OF CHINA
Roads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - share its experience in railway construction - encourage enterprises to participate in railway priorities - conduct feasibility studies for priority railways, e.g., subsequent phases of Mindanao Railway project and other proposed railway projects
Bridges For construction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pasig-Marikina River and Manggahan Floodway - North South Harbor Bridge - Palanca-Villegas Bridge - Beata-F.Y. Manalo Bridge - Blumentritt Antipolo Bridge - East Bank-West Bank Bridge 1 - Other priority bridge projects For feasibility studies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Panay Guimaras-Negros Island Bridge - Negros-Cebu Link Bridge - Cebu Bohol Link Bridge - Leyte-Surigao Link Bridge - Luzon-Samar Bridge - Other priority inter-island bridges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - share experience in bridge construction - encourage enterprises to participate in priority projects, particularly in construction of the priority bridges and conduct of feasibility studies
Ferries	Encourage enterprises to participate in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - fleet acquisition, waterway pollution control, communication services, among others - route development, transportation engineering and management, promotion of safe navigation, rehabilitation and upgrading of the stations/terminal facilities, and integration of ferry to inter-modal transport system, among others
Airports	Encourage enterprises to participate in the construction or development of airports in various regions
Agriculture	(the section merely states that both countries agree upon irrigation and fish ports as main areas for agriculture cooperation)
Irrigation - Ilocos Norte Irrigation Project Phase II	Encourage enterprises to participate in the implementation of priority projects
Fish Ports	Encourage enterprises to participate in the implementation of priority fish port development projects
Fish Ports	Encourage enterprises to participate in the implementation of priority fish port development projects

PRIORITY INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS AND THE ROLE OF CHINA

TRANSPORTATION PRIORITY PROJECTS	ROLE OF CHINA
<p>Power</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rehabilitation of all Agus-Pulangi Hydro-electric Plant Units <p>Water Resource Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ambal-Simuay River and Rio Grande de Mindanao River Flood Control Projects - Bohon Northeast Basin Multipurpose Project - Tumauni River Multipurpose Project - Panay River Basin Integrated Development Project - New Centennial Water Source-Kaliwa Dam Project - Other projects 	<p>Encourage enterprises to participate in the conduct of feasibility studies, in the public bidding, as well as in the competitive generation market of the Philippines</p> <p>Encourage enterprises to participate in priority projects, and conduct feasibility studies of priority projects related to flood control, water impounding, river dredging, and management projects</p>
<p>ICT/Telecommunications</p>	<p>Encourage enterprises to participate in priority projects, particularly in telecommunications information technology projects, more specifically in establishing big data system and promoting new philosophy behind city development such as intelligent city and safe city among others; and in strengthening technical cooperation and exchanges on telecommunications</p>

Source: [INFRASTRUCTURE COOPERATION PROGRAM BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES AND THE GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, 2018](#)

Not many of the projects Beijing promised Duterte materialized, but four had been heavily criticized for disregarding the rule of law and for lacking transparency and accountability, e.g., lack of information on contractor selection for Chico River Pump Irrigation Project or CRPIP, the selection of the third telecommunications player in the Philippines, the Safe Philippines project, and the Kaliwa Dam (Rivas and Tomacruz 2021).

Neither the Kaliwa Dam nor the CRPIP was conceived by Chinese investors, but both projects have manifested signs of Duterte's autocratic tendencies.

Academic Camba said that like many other projects, these two projects are largely transplants designed to offshore and export Chinese technology, labor, and policy designs to host countries.

Camba did fieldwork for both dam projects from 2018 to 2020, and site visits to several Philippine provinces that have been affected by both ventures. He argued that "these views have little regard for important nuances of place, time, and politics, ignoring the degree

to which host countries—such as local elites, members of civil society, and norms—shape project design, implementation, and results on the ground.”

Political elites in the Philippines, he said, have pressed Chinese firms to “adapt to some of their demands for political expediency on key infrastructure projects” and that “Manila has bypassed local social and environmental regulations and has paved the way for Chinese dam builders to break ground on projects quickly so as to strengthen the Duterte government’s political standing.” The political economist made clear, however, that the practices are not exclusive to projects involving Chinese lending and often emerge in key private-sector projects in the natural resources and mining sectors.

In the case of Kaliwa Dam, the local players are the Armed Forces of the Philippines, whose interest in the project lies in their intent to expand their operations against the New People’s Army (NPA) and has established checkpoints around the area; and the Angara political dynasty of the adjacent Aurora province whose local power is also threatened by the NPA.

In the case of the CRPIP, Camba quoted a political broker who worked with the Duterte government in 2016 as saying it was “proposed to the Chinese, but the idea (given to them) was already modified at that time to provide irrigation to local fields where elites grow bananas, coconuts, and other fruits to be exported to China.”

According to the broker, “water from the Chico Pump would benefit the lowland Filipino landlords and the Filipino farm holders” in Cagayan province – a siphoning off of the oppressed and marginalized Kalinga indigenous people’s resources to support the interests of the elites in the next province. Cagayan province’s Mamba and Enrile political clans are allies of Duterte and Marcos respectively, and, the broker said, “had representatives who modified the irrigation pump project from something that had been originally intended for the Kalinga to something bigger and a project that ultimately benefits the landed interests of Cagayan.”

Such culpability of the local ruling elite notwithstanding, China and its own actors are hardly off the hook, considering their high attentiveness to adaptation/accommodation of the local political will and norms, limiting or even avoiding relationships with opposition elites and civil society.

“In the Philippines, the efforts of the Duterte government and associated elites to expedite the Kaliwa Dam project and the CRPIP demonstrates how local elites can help foreign players bypass social, environment, and regulatory provisions for parochial political objectives,” said Camba in a 2021 paper. “In this way, Chinese players are fueling social dislocation and mass disruption. These Chinese actors are doing so not so much

because they are exporting a putative China model, but because they are responding to demand-side signals from local players and elites who are in conflict with others in host countries like the Philippines.”

Camba, however, noted “one of the few areas” where the Duterte administration was unable to “simply bend Chinese players to its political will.”

Using AidData’s 2021 study scrutinizing the negotiation phase for the two projects at hand, Camba observed that Chinese contracts, just like the 100 debt contracts analyzed, focus on how to expand influence over host countries through project non-disclosure agreements, exclusion from Paris Club debt restructuring, expedited project payment, and immediate termination clauses – which effectively prevent civil-society actors of foreign lenders from forming strategies to match Chinese-lending terms or to help the host country restructure such debt, and increase the exclusivity of an investment partnership to those who have forged it; and which indicate China’s strong interest in expanding and protecting their projects’ commercial viability.

He added how a NEDA official involved in the negotiations said that “the negotiators from the Export-Import Bank of China wanted these clauses more than anything” that they gave in to Duterte team’s other demands, such as decreasing the interest payments for both projects and fast tracking the project or major parts of its in time for or before the end of Duterte’s term.

Camba then identified the ways by which the Chinese government has reinforced the local elite’s illiberal practices in these two projects:

- Lack of transparency throughout the negotiation process;
- Giving Chinese workers higher wages than those of their Filipino counterparts;
- Not having any responsibility for social amelioration, land reclamation, and environmental impact assessments;
- Having the same desire to fast track project construction, thereby enabling Duterte to showcase both projects as part of his legacy under his Build, Build, Build program at the expense of the Filipino people who would shoulder the loan payment at a higher interest rate (compared to Japanese lenders’ offer of interest rate of two percent over 20 years) and suffer from the Philippine government agencies’ bypassing, pressuring, or ignoring of the people and local governments with the help of the armed forces.

In the case of Kaliwa Dam, the Chinese contractor, CEEC, already conducted preliminary project activities even when the signed loan agreement was not yet considered effective due to lacking requirements ([Lalu, 2019](#)).

Chinese Embassy Spokesperson's Comment on the Kaliwa Dam Project

Q: There have recently been some concerns over the China-funded Kaliwa Dam Project among several Filipinos. Could you clarify that?

A: As an important part of the New Centennial Water Source of the Philippines, once completed, the Kaliwa Dam Project will fundamentally alleviate the severe challenge of the water shortage in the Metro Manila. It is of great significance to meet the long-term water demand and improve the basic quality of the life of the local people.

The Project is one of the great achievements in helping the Philippines with more livelihood projects through China-Philippines mutually beneficial infrastructure cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road initiative and the Build, Build, Build plan, aiming to instill a greater sense of fulfillment and satisfaction among our peoples. In the spirit of amity, mutual trust and results-oriented cooperation, China and the Philippines agreed that the project would be funded by China will continue to work with the Philippines to ensure early implementation of the Kaliwa Dam Project for the benefit of the local people.

Source: Chinese Embassy Manila (Chinaembmanila), 2020

Still, it is also important to go back to the agreements that both the Chinese and Philippine governments, a.k.a. ruling elites, made in the infrastructure cooperation program, where these projects are listed as priorities.

In the agreement, all that the both sides committed to was to encourage enterprises to participate and make direct investments in these projects, and for the government to create a more favorable investment environment, such as investment facilitation, protection of investors' interests, and property and safety, and confidentiality of information. Since the Philippines agreed to facilitate project implementation, it also facilitates the implementation of pre-requisites that it has the sole responsibility for: land expropriation and resettlement, streamlining of procedures for the exit and entry of project equipment and personnel – supposedly subject to existing laws, rules, and regulations. Unfortunately, the Philippine government itself does not subject itself to its own existing laws, rules, and regulations, as is highly evident in the railroading of Kaliwa Dam despite strong people's opposition -- and China does not care.

Because of these, many Chinese-funded projects in the past administrations had been highly controversial and vulnerable to corruption, which Duterte said is "endemic in government" ([Dela Pena, 2021](#)), to the point that they had been derailed, and their proponents investigated.

One example is the Philippine National Railway Modernization and Rehabilitation Project (PNR-MRP), which along with then President Arroyo was heavily criticized in 2005. Then lawmaker Crispin Beltran exposed Arroyo's abuse of authority and bypassing of other government branches' authority for signing the contract, which had been kept in secret since 2003, even as it had the potential to have the country paying double the loan amount, as well as put up the country's natural resources and other assets

as collateral for a project that would displace hundreds of thousands of Filipinos living along the railway tracks. Beltran also accused China of “taking full advantage of the Philippines, and the Philippine government led by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo allowed it to happen” ([Anakpawis Partylist, 2005](#)).

The US\$329 million ZTE National Broadband Network deal during the Arroyo administration also became controversial after its Filipino project evaluator blew the whistle over elections commissions chief Benjami Abalos Sr.’s demand of a US\$130-million cut. A Chinese telecommunications company that is partly state-owned, ZTE allegedly paid tens of millions of dollars as kickbacks (with Arroyo and her husband among the recipients), and some US\$30 million as election funds to several Filipino politicians ahead of the 2007 Philippine polls. Businessman and long-time politician Jose de Venecia said that he earlier offered to do the project for US\$130 million but that ZTE later bagged the contract after proposing to do it for US\$329 million. De Venecia blamed the fiasco on officials in Manila, saying that “officials here were trying to extort money from ZTE. Unfortunately, ZTE was willing to participate ([Facts and Details, 2015](#)).”

The ZTE-NBN corruption scandal is believed to have led to the Chinese pullout from the Diosdado Macapagal International Airport and to allegations that Arroyo allowed the joint seismic exploration of the West Philippine Sea with China because of such bribe-tainted loans ([Malig, 2011](#)). In 2016, however, a Philippine court acquitted both Arroyo and Abalos of the charges in relation to this scandal.

Under the Duterte administration, Chinese FDI, particularly unaccountable state-backed Chinese investments, have been found to exacerbate the governance gaps and loopholes of Philippine regulatory and policymaking processes and government agencies. In the gambling industry, for example, unaccountable state-backed money from Chinese investors exploits PAGCOR’s conflicting and contradictory roles as regulator, market participant, and revenue collector. In the energy industry, local authorities were found to routinely disregard national security reviews of the State Grid Corporation of China’s role in the country’s sole energy distribution agency ([A. Camba 2020](#)).

NAVAL ARMADA VS. SMALL FISHERFOLK

FOR GENERATIONS, the West Philippine Sea²⁵ has been the source of life and livelihood for fisherfolk from four big administrative regions in northern and central Philippines, as well as from the national capital region.

According to *The President's Final Report of Duterte*, fish production from WPS averaged 318,040 metric tons from 2016-2020, and that in 2020 alone, it contributed an average of 7.8 percent of the year's total production. It is also a potential source of oil and gas, which are both crucial to the Philippines, especially now that war continues to rage in Ukraine.

The territorial dispute in the WPS is clearly not just one involving claimant nations; it has also become an internecine battle between big Chinese's naval vessels pushing away small boats of the estimated 318,000 Filipino fisherfolk that depend on these waters.

Duterte's report cited these as his administration's accomplishments on this issue:

- Creation of National Task Force on the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) by virtue of MC No. 94 (although this was dated 2016 Mar 17 – which was still covered by the preceding administration);
- Renaming of Benham Rise to Philippine Rise to reaffirm sovereignty over it (2017 May 16);
- Declaring Philippine Rise as a Marine Protected Area (2018 May);
- Departure of Chinese maritime militia vessels from Sabina Shoal due to stepped-up PCG, BFAR, and PN patrols in the WPS (2021 Apr 27); and
- Establishment of a safe space with China in order to build trust and reach consensus over the WPS – done via bilateral visits and cooperative mechanisms:
 - The Bilateral Consultation Mechanism with China enabled continuous discussions, under which both countries committed to exercise restraint in conducting activities in the WPS
 - 107 diplomatic protests on China's activities in the WPS that are not in accordance with international law as Duterte's "peaceful offensive action."

To this day, however, China continues its illegal fishing, illegal presence, and unauthorized marine scientific research in the WPS, according to Defense Undersecretary Angelito de Leon. China has continued to reject the [2016 arbitral decision](#), and even further militarized the Philippine waters. China has continued to militarize the WPS despite 172 diplomatic protests as of 31 August 2022, on top of the 388 filed under Duterte, according to DFA Foreign Assistant Secretary for Maritime and Ocean Affairs Maria Angela Ponce ([Rubio, 2022](#)).

Bad Results of Chinese Incursions

A decade since China's takeover of Scarborough Shoal,²⁶ imposition of a fishing ban,²⁷ and six years since the Duterte administration said Filipinos were again free to fish in the WPS, the situation has changed for the worse.

Loss of livelihood and impoverishment. According to Fernando Hicap, national chairperson of the fisherfolk group Pamalakaya, their Zambales chapter reported a 70-percent decline in fish catch in 2021 alone due to their loss of freedom to fish in Scarborough. Many were forced to fish within municipal waters, where there is less catch; those who persevere in Scarborough face restrictions from the Chinese.

Macario Forones, owner of one of Masinloc town's two commercial vessels, confirmed this, saying, "The second time we were driven away, I lost all hope." He used to bring home three to four tons of assorted fish per trip amounting to as much as PHP 500,000 (US\$9,100); now he is only getting by - just enough for food, and electric and water bills. Forones has shifted to seafood buy-and-sell and maintains a stall at the local market. He said it would not be easy to go back to Scarborough fishing because of the cost; the impact is worse on the smaller fisherfolk, such as his cousin Efren, he added.

"I fished in Scarborough from 1995 to 2012," he recalled. "We used to go there yearly. Those who do spearfishing start in January all the way to the end of April. Me, I was a captain of a carrier boat, spending two to three nights to fetch and bring their catch to town. That's how I made a living, I received salaries on top of earnings from my sidelines - hook-fishing, bowfishing in Scarborough while waiting for the boat to get filled. That gives me an additional one or two thousand pesos. That's a big deal - that went to household expenses and allowed me to save my salary. At times I could save as much as PHP 20,000 (US\$365). Come the rainy days, I had something. That allowed me to send one child to college. Unlike now doing *payaw* (fishing within municipal waters using a fish-aggregating device) - no income."

Philip Macapanas, who used to do spearfishing for a commercial vessel in Scarborough, said he earned as much as PHP 1,500 (US\$27) per day spent in Scarborough - in con-

trast to his maximum PHP 300 (US\$5.50) gross income from *payaw* fishing. Even before the forced closure of the local commercial fishing vessels, the presence of the Chinese coast guards was a constant threat to their livelihoods.

“The Chinese trespassed and took every good catch,” Macapanas said. “It was very painful because we worked hard for those.



We would leave the mother boat at five a.m., hunt for fish until two p.m. But when they began taking and leaving almost nothing, we could not do anything because they were armed.”

As of 2021, some 4,000 families in Zambales and Pangasinan provinces alone were displaced from their homes and livelihoods, according to local fisherfolk group Pangisda (Bello, 2021).

Marine ecosystem destruction. Hicap said that there have been scientific studies²⁸ proving the destruction of trillions-of-pesos-worth of coral reefs that have been transformed into artificial islands -- the land area of which already totaled around 16,000 hectares or even more as of 2020, taking into account the area of where the land fillings were sourced. Besides such

constructions, Chinese fishers' methods are also destructive, targeting mainly giant clams and further endangering already endangered species such as *pawikan* and *mameng*.

Macapanas's last memory of Scarborough's sea floor was far from what it looked like when he first went fishing there. "The corals were dead because the Chinese dig up the shells of the giant clams," he said. Parts that used to be just two or three feet deep became seven yards, like a deep well. The fish were already evasive."

Table 7. CHINESE DESTRUCTIVE FISHING ACTIVITIES IN SCARBOROUGH SHOAL

1998	January and March. Chinese fishermen were found in possession of corals and marine turtles, and dynamites
2000	April. Three Chinese fishing vessels were found loaded with corals, cyanide, blasting caps, detonating cord, and dynamite
2001	January and March. Ph authorities confiscated the catch of endangered marine resources and destructive instruments from Chinese fishing vessels; the incident led to diplomatic exchanges in which China asserted sovereignty over Scarborough
2002	There were at least three occasions whereby the Ph navy confiscated explosives, cyanides, corals, sea shells and sea clams from Chinese fishing vessels
2004	Ph navy intercepted Chinese fishing vessels laden with giant clams
2005	Ph vessel confiscated assorted corals, live clamshells and illegal fishing gears from four Chinese fishing vessels; Chinese Vice Foreign Minister summoned Ph Ambassador in Beijing to convey China's grave concern and strong opposition and to assert sovereignty
2006	Ph navy located Chinese fishing vessels with assorted corals and shells
2012	<p>April. Ph navy found large amounts of corals and giant clams inside Chinese vessels; two government vessels, in response, placed themselves between the Ph naval vessel and the eight Chinese fishing boats – the incident that led to the “diplomatic standoff”. Chinese operations continued.</p> <p>May. The Philippines has stopped sending any further vessels, limiting its monitoring of poaching activities.</p> <p>June. China deployed about 28 utility boats to block the entrance to the lagoon of the shoal; Filipino fishermen, based on testimonies submitted to the PCA, were forced to stop fishing because of the prohibition and harassment (e.g. being met/barred by armed Chinese coast guards).</p> <p>The Embassy of China in Manila published a statement claiming Scarborough</p>
2012 April	Beginning of series of incidents between Ph and Chinese vessels that heightened tensions; Ph authorities reported increasing numbers of Chinese fishing vessels and stepped-up inspections regarding reports of destructive fishing. China, in response, increased its own FLEC and CMS vessels

Reference: [In the matter of the South China Sea Arbitration, 2016](#)

Table 8 . CHINA'S ISLAND-BUILDING ACTIVITIES IN SPRATLY ISLANDS

Fiery Cross Reef

- 1988 – construction began with a small naval post, followed by an oceanographic observation post, pier, and several other buildings; and in subsequent years, communications systems and lighthouses
- 2013 – completed complex of buildings with significant communications and defense and military features, and a greenhouse and powerhouse
- 2014 – construction of a runway
- 2015 – intensified land reclamation, presence of at least 18 vessels unloading construction equipment; by November, some 2.74 million sq m of land had been created (300 times larger than pre-existing installations). Installations include 3-km runway, 630,000-sq m harbor, multiple cement plants, support buildings, temporary loading piers, communication facilities, defense equipment, two lighthouses, a greenhouse, two helipads, and a multi-level administrative facility adjacent to the runway



Figure 13: Fiery Cross Reef Installation circa 2011
armed Forces of the Philippines. Matrix of Events: Fiery Cross (Kagitingan) Reef (2013) (Am



CSIS | AMTI | MAXAR
Photo as of 17 June 2022

Gaven Reef (North)

- 1988 – start of China's presence
- 1996 – outpost with barracks and two octagonal structures
- 2005 – three-storey concrete building with communications equipment
- 2011 – further entrenchments
- 2014 – start of intense reclamation
- 2015 – new helipad, watch post, wharf expansion
- 2016 – a completed artificial island measuring 300x250m created from 136,000 sq m of materials dredged from seabed



CSIS | AMTI | MAXAR
Photo as of 4 June 2022

Johnson Reef

- 1988 – start of China's presence
- 1992 – construction of a heavily fortified area with an observation tower
- 2006 – construction of a three-storey concrete building, communications equipment, solar panels, and a helipad
- 2014 – extensive reclamation; additional buildings, solar panels, paved roads, piers detected
- 2015 – Chinese Ministry of Transport held a ceremony for the construction of a lighthouse; completion as artificial island measuring approx. 109,000 sq m, nearly 1,000 times larger than the previous structure

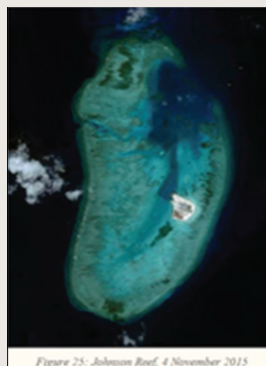


Figure 25: Johnson Reef, 4 November 2015



CSIS | AMTI | MAXAR
Photo as of 11 February 2022

Table 8 . CHINA'S ISLAND-BUILDING ACTIVITIES IN SPRATLY ISLANDS**Hughes Reef**

- 1988 – start of China's presence
- 2006 – installation of a three-storey concrete building and helipad
- 2013 – additional powerhouses and communications equipment
- 2014 – large-scale reclamation activities
- 2015 – permanent pier, construction of a six-storey building, large cargo vessels transporting sand sediments for the reclaimed land; completion of artificial island approx. 75,000 sq m with coastal fortifications, defensive towers, and a multi-level facility, 118-meter-wide access channel for larger vessels



Figure 27. Hughes Reef, 22 September 2013



Photo as of 4 April 2022

Subi Reef

- 1989 – start of Chinese presence
- 1994 – at least five buildings, a wharf, a helipad
- 2006 – four-storey concrete building
- 2013 – more concrete structures, a lighthouse, and a communications equipment
- 2014-2015 – large scale dredging;
- 2015 – artificial island created measuring approx. 3.95 million sq m with an initially 3-km runway, a large multi-level facility, reinforced sea walls, towers, communications facilities, and a 230-meter-wide access channel



Figure 14. Subi Reef installation circa 2017. Annual Report of the Philippines, Office of Executive Subj. Governance (OESG) (June 16)



Photo as of 27 March 2020

Cuarteron Reef

- 1992 – three small buildings
- 1997 – further buildings, wharves, and communications facilities
- 2006 – three-storey building, a concrete platform and a helipad
- 2013 - more concrete buildings, solar panels, weather and communications instruments, observation towers, temporary pier, a barge for hauling construction materials
- 2014 through 2015 - more substantial and intensified reclamation, permanent pier already evident; Chinese Ministry of Transport held a ceremony to mark the beginning of a construction on a 50-meter lighthouse “to better carry out China’s international responsibilities and obligations...”; presence of large vessels and dredgers; by November 2015, there was already at least 231,000 sq m of new land



Photo as of 26 May 2022

Mischief Reef (Panganiban Reef)

- 1995 - start of construction beginning with “typhoon shelters”
- 1999 – multi-storey structures, communications equipment, wharves, a helipad
- 2014 – intense reclamation and construction; artificial island created by November measuring approx. 5.58 million sq m
- 2015 – entire northern half of the reef is already an artificial island approx. 5.580 million sq m of new land, with fortified seawalls, temporary loading piers, cement plants, and a 250-meter-wide channel for large vessels, and



Photo as of 23 April 2020

Reference: [In the matter of the South China Sea Arbitration, 2016](#)

Photos: [Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, n.d.](#)

Food insecurity. Since 2007, the Philippine fishing industry has been experiencing a downward trend in the supply of the “poor man’s fish” roundscad or *galunggong* -- from 244,671 metric tons that year to 126,533 metric tons in 2017 ([Ison, 2019](#)). This led BFAR in 2018 to import for local wet markets, even if these may have also been sourced from the Philippines’ very own waters ([Rivas R., 2018](#); [Bello, 2021](#)). Seeing further decline in 2022, the Department of Agriculture allowed the importation of 60,000 metric tons of fish products to address the shortage in local supply ([Dela Pena, 2022](#)). The Philippines buys about one fourth of its fish imports from China and, per reports from the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea in 2021, at least 240,000 kilos of fish were being illegally taken by Chinese vessels from the country’s waters each day ([Lagare, 2022](#)). According to food security advocacy group Tugon Kabuhayan, the Philippines already lost 3.6 million kilograms of fish (worth US\$64 million) and can lose 7.2 million kilograms of fish products per month because of Chinese presence in WPS ([Dela Pena, 2022](#)). In March 2021 alone, 220 Chinese fishing vessels were seen assembling in WPS, particularly in Julian Felipe Reef ([Tomacruz, 2021](#)).

Fear, Trauma, Anger, Frustration. With all the loss of livelihood and harassment they have experienced, it is inevitable for them to feel fear, trauma and hatred toward the Chinese, Hicap said.

Recalled Forones: “In 2012, about 20 of us were driven away by China Coast Guard – they had a speedboat that tailed us, they had AK-47 guns, one speedboat had five men. They drove us away with hand gestures as they could not speak English...We were able to return the following year, for three months, but after that we were again driven away, again by armed men. We were blocked by their boats from getting close to the reef and they had speed boats with armed men on board. At first, we were confronted by just one boat, but when we were being driven away, there were already two...Of course we feared for our lives. We are just ordinary people, unarmed. They did not point their guns at us, but of course, if you resist, who knows what could happen? So we just left to avoid trouble.”

“Now when you say ‘China’,” he said, “people can’t help but be affected because of the severe loss of income they have caused us.” Forones also expressed frustration, saying that fishermen never failed to report what they saw and experienced in the area, which was perhaps why the Navy once set a ship. “But nothing happened, that ship ran away and we all went home to our respective towns,” he said, adding that even with the countless local and foreign media interviews they have entertained, “nothing has happened.”

Miguel Betana, captain of a big vessel, still carries the fear he felt in 2013 when they were water cannoned by the Chinese coast guards. “In terms of effect, of course you cannot avoid fear,” he said. “We were water cannoned, 15 or 16 of us. We were anchored outside the shoal when they drove us away. We would not leave because of course a single trip to Scarborough lasts 16-18 hours and costs around PHP80,000-100,000 (US\$1,500 -1,800). So they pushed us with their boat and they kept doing so and finally water cannoned us.”

Making bad results worse

Perhaps the strongest indicator of illiberal democracy in the handling of the WPS issue is the silencing of people's voices – both within the government and on the ground.

Gag order on government officials regarding WPS. On 18 May 2021, Duterte ordered all government officials, except for Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin and Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque, from talking about the WPS with anybody after foreign and defense secretaries [repeatedly criticized](#) Beijing for refusing to withdraw its ships. At the local level, a Masinloc municipal official who requested anonymity said that the mayor would not say anything except that “the municipal government completely trusts the policy and direction of the national government. Whatever the national government policy is, we support. We do not have a specific position at this point.” Similarly, Masinloc Coast Guard Deputy Commander Gervy Mayo said only the headquarters was allowed to speak on the matter.

Reversing officials' statements, lambasting critics. Some officials brave enough to speak up reversed their statements later on. Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, who exposed the Chinese vessel Yuemaobinyu's ramming of the boat Gem-Ver in June 2019, shifted from condemning the incident to echoing China's and Duterte's position: “I think it's just an accident” ([Esmaquel, 2019](#)). Despite saying he would ignore critics upon the advice of Senator Juan Ponce Enrile ([Staff, 2021](#)), Duterte still badmouthed critics such as former foreign affairs secretary Albert del Rosario ([Ranada P., 2021](#)), retired Supreme Court Associate Justice Antonio Carpio ([Punzalan, 2021](#)) and Senator [Manny Pacquiao](#) ([Agcaoili, 2021](#)).

Denying harassment by Chinese coast guards. Despite the 11 June 2018 TV documentary ([GMA Public Affairs, 2019](#)) having captured the Chinese Coast Guard's harassment of Philippine fisherfolk, then presidential spokesperson Roque described it as a mere act of “fish thieving,” further saying that “they (the Chinese) are the ones in power there...they are there, they are the ones guarding it, and the Philippines does not have any vessel keeping watch.”

Discrediting fisherfolk, belying their statements about lack of freedom and their condition. Not only did Roque downgrade harassment to “fish thieving,” he also belied fisherfolk testimonies that they were being barred from Scarborough. “I dispute that,” he said. “All of them have already returned to their livelihoods especially in Borough ([Panti, 2021](#)).” In response to local fisherfolk's complaints of catch and income declines, Masinloc, Zambales Mayor Arsenia Lim likewise said, “(T)he fishermen can make a living without any trouble. You will see that no one is causing them harm nor barring them.” She also asserted that there were still tons of fish in the shoal and within the municipal waters ([Aglibot, 2021](#)).

Getting fishermen to reverse their statements. After the 9 June 2019 incident in which Yue-maobinyu 42212 rammed F/B Gem-Ver near Reed Bank in the WPS, Duterte sent two of his alter egos to speak with and handover assistance to the fishermen: Energy Secretary Alfonso Cusi and Agriculture Secretary Manny Piñol (Kabiling, 2019). The fisherfolk felt insulted (Balasbas, 2019), when Cusi and Duterte belittled the accident and implied that they were not telling the truth (GMA News, 2019). After Piñol's closed-door meeting with the Gem-Ver crew at a house surrounded by cops in full battle gear, boat captain Junel Insigne retracted his earlier statements (Esmaque, 2019) and apologized to Duterte (Mercado, 2019).

Summoning fisherfolk to withdraw from petitions. Hicap said that the navy, police, and the coast guard talked to the Kalayaan Palawan Farmers and Fisherfolk Association members one by one with regard to their 2019 petition to the Supreme Court to compel Duterte to enforce laws protecting and preventing Chinese ships from further damaging the WPS (Buan L., 2019). Petitioner Monico Abogado confirmed he was "pressured" into withdrawing after the Navy and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) summoned him to explain. Fishers Randy Dacumos and Larry Hugo were also summoned by a Navy lawyer telling them their boat would not be allowed to sail unless all petitioners had been interviewed and cleared – by saying they knew nothing about the petition. Their legal counsel was threatened with a disbarment case by Solicitor General Jose Calida (Navallo, 2019).

Red-tagging, threats, and surveillance of fisherfolk groups and leaders. Hicap said that their campaign against Chinese incursion in the WPS increased their experience of red-tagging, vilification, and various forms of rights violations. "Pamalakaya is red-tagged whenever we hold protest actions against China," he said. Pamalakaya Vice President for Luzon (whose jurisdiction covers Zambales) Bobby Roldan, in particular, has been a target since 2019: after joining media interviews about Chinese dredging ships in Zambales during a [WPS documentary video shoot](#), criticizing Chinese dredging and mining at a dialogue with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, and breaking the news of Chinese ship ramming of Gem-Ver boat during their Independence Day / 12 June 2019 protest action in front of the Chinese Embassy.

Repeated betrayal of national interest. Retired Senior Associate Justice Antonio Carpio said Duterte violated the Philippine Constitution and laws on these grounds (Antonio, 2021; Carpio, 2021):

- Ordering the Navy to limit patrols to the territorial sea of the Philippines facing the WPS rather than the entire EEZ – violation of the Constitution, which commands that the "State shall protect the nation's marine wealth in its xxx exclusive economic zone (Sept 2016)";
- Setting aside in November 2016 the landmark 12 July 2016 arbitral award, which in law means to abandon or reverse the Award that affirmed Ph sovereign rights in its

EEZ, in favor of loans and investments from China;

- Stating in 2016, through then DFA Secretary Perfecto Yasay, that the government was willing to enter into a joint exploration agreement with China in the WPS, particularly in the Reed Bank. Carpio said that the government can contract, but not partner with, a foreign company to help the Philippines ([Politiko, 2016](#)).
- Entering into a verbal fishing agreement with Xi that would allow the Chinese to fish in the Philippine EEZ when the Constitution commands the State to reserve the nation's marine wealth in the EEZ in the WPS for exclusive use and enjoyment of Filipino citizens. Only Filipinos can fish in Philippine EEZs. Carpio said that Duterte had no authority to grant the same to the Chinese;
- Repeatedly announcing that China is in possession of the WPS, which Carpio said was irresponsible and illegal as a clear derogation of the Philippines' sovereign rights in the WPS with serious ramifications (e.g.: inability to explore Reed Bank for oil and gas in anticipation of the nearing running out of supply in Malampaya); and
- Announcing in his fifth SONA in July 2019 that he is "inutile" when it comes to defending the WPS, which Carpio said speaks for itself: a betrayal of national interest.

Additionally, Duterte agreed to a joint investigation on the Mindoro ramming incident, which then Senator Franklin Drilon said "derogate(s) our jurisdiction and prejudice our claim." Duterte also let China decide how it wanted to be accountable, and permitted continuing Chinese presence in Philippine waters. He even sounded like China's spokesperson when he explained that China also considers Recto Bank with its jurisdiction despite it being within the Philippine EEZ.

Finally, Duterte recognized China's claim but not the Philippines', even appealing to China in May 2021 to just allow Filipino fishers to "fish in peace." He said he told Xi Jinping: "I told China, I know that it's yours, according to you, I've heard that several times. But you must also have heard of the fact that Filipinos are hungry, and you are not oblivious to that fact, so kindly just allow our fishermen to fish in peace."

Asked about Mayor Lim's silence on WPS, Hicap said that more than China, that was due to the strong pressure from Duterte, who wanted to avoid repercussions on the joint exploration then being worked out by Manila and Beijing. A local government official said that the mayor was simply playing safe so as not to compromise the LGU's resources coming from the national government.

On the red-tagging and sustained surveillance on him, Pamalakaya's Roldan said, "I think that's more Duterte. He kept saying he is friends with China."

Duterte himself had said repeatedly that China is a friend to whom the country has much to thank for ([Duterte sees China as a menacing friend, ever since US failed to deliver prom-](#)

[ised arms, 2022](#); [Garcia M., 2021](#)). He also seemed to see Beijing as his personal protector, claiming that Xi Jinping had assured him China would not allow an ouster plot by the United States to prosper ([Esmaque, 2018](#)). But when it came to WPS, Duterte said that early in his term, Xi had warned him of trouble should he pursue plans to go there for oil exploration ([Aguilar, 2021](#)). According to Duterte, he could not afford a war, and even if he could, “the Chinese government will just give you a finger...Nothing will happen.”

Former government officials and analysts, in addition to what Duterte himself has proclaimed, cite these as possible explanations for Duterte’s actions toward Beijing:

- China has plenty of money. Many have time and again said that Duterte coveted so much the pledged US\$24 billion in loans and investments and saw the BRI as an opportunity for his highly ambitious BBB program ([Tucay, 2021](#)). Former Philippine Ambassador to the United States Jose Cuisia, for one, said that Duterte “thought that by being nice to China he would get loans, he would get investments – and he did get pledges, but that is all he got. How much has been realized? What have we gotten?” ([Tomacruz, 2021](#)). Besides loans and investments, Duterte also wanted to increase the country’s annual Chinese visitors, especially after having been overtaken in the tourism game by Vietnam and Cambodia ([BizNewsAsia, 2017](#)). When the pledges did not turn into cash, Duterte started to utter strong statements on the WPS and renewed friendship with the United States (Tucay, 2021);
- To clinch the oil and gas cooperation with China in the WPS, which could have scored a win for Duterte, as some critics view the deal “as a possible gamechanger in unlocking the country’s maritime dispute with China” (Tomacruz, Duterte and the West Philippine Sea: A strategy of failed compromises, 2021);
- Manila cannot guard the WPS considering that in all of ASEAN, the Philippines has the most primitive armed forces; neither can it (or simply is not interested to) explore and develop its resources. Corruption is so massive that the country’s oligarchs justify the eradication of the poor instead of poverty (BizNewsAsia, 2017);
- Duterte could be simply amazed of China’s development model and achievements since 2008, which enabled it to become the world’s top economic contributor as a manufacturer, exporter, creditor, and capital provider (BizNewsAsia, 2017); and
- China influenced the 2016 elections. Del Rosario claimed to have received on 22 February 2019 information from a most reliable international entity that “high officials from China are bragging that they had been able to influence the 2016 Philippine elections so that Rodrigo Duterte would be president...We believe that our Beijing post can easily validate this ([Mangosing, 2021](#); [Sinha, 2021](#)).”

Bobby Tuazon, Director for Policy Studies at Center for People Empowerment and Governance, confirms the first proposed reason. "I get to talk to some Chinese and they say that Duterte just wants the money," he said. "While they say they are amenable to giving him that, they find it difficult without exchanges/bilateral talks."

He recalled how China offered Duterte proposals for joint oil and natural gas and even marine industry development in the WPS that the Aquino III government had junked, how there had been bilateral negotiations to resolve contentious issues, and how a few months before his term ended, Duterte terminated the talks. "I don't know if he knows diplomacy," said Tuazon. "Maybe at that time when China was already rethinking about giving more and more money and then they slowed it down, I think that's the time that Duterte terminated the talks."

Tuazon said that China need not do anything to influence the Philippines; China, besides its principle of non-interference, is able to get better results from other countries. He recounted how a high-ranking Chinese official expressed strong interest to help with a comprehensive railways system during Duterte's early days, despite knowing that half of their money would go to corruption. But Tuazon said that China lost interest after seeing politicians pursuing their parochial interests/highly localized infrastructure projects.

Nonetheless, he continued, "they cannot but deal with the government, who are oligarchs with their own vested interests. But that kind of awareness is what guides them to deal with the Philippine government with caution. They are more give-and-take – 'we give this, we get something.' That is diplomacy." Whatever its implications are for the WPS, he said, that would be the responsibility of the Philippines – not China's or the United States'.

"China can deal and have to deal with any kind of government but will never intervene," Tuazon said. "They won't get anything from it. What, imitate the U.S.? Nurture the president and make him a puppet? What will happen to China and its integrity? They have now the power and influence to deal with any kind of government, but they cannot dictate. They just live with it – these are the limitations of that government, we operate based on that."

PH MEDIA, DISINFORMATION, AND CHINA

China has been making attempts to get other countries to see matters its way. In 2020, the U.S.-based Freedom House expressed concern about China's media-influencing efforts throughout Asia and Africa. In the case of the Philippines, it noted that even much earlier, Beijing had already been inviting Filipino journalists to try to inculcate in them a type of journalism ("socialist journalism with Chinese characteristics") that deviates from traditional democratic principles and presents a positive image of China and its Chinese Communist Party ([Viray, 2020](#)).

For sure, even without China in the picture, the Philippine media have constantly been under attack in various forms – even after the restoration of democracy following the ouster of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. in 1986.

Unlike his relatively liberal predecessors, however, Duterte issued threats and warnings to journalists, even before he could take his oath as president in 2016. Under his administration, disinformation, troll armies, hate speech on social media, and pro-Duterte networks have transcended to actual harassment, physical injuries, and murders of journalists.

The Philippines ranked 7th in the Global Impunity Index for 2021 and 2022 of the Committee to Protect Journalists. And just four months into the Marcos Jr administration, three critical radio commentators Percival Mabasa, Renato Blanco ([Dunham, 2022](#)) and Federico Gempesaw ([CPJ, 2022](#)) were shot dead.

Freedom House gives a comprehensive overview of [China's various efforts to influence the Philippine media](#), the narratives conveyed, and the outcomes of all these. The report covered efforts ranging from:

- Diplomatic communications in print and online;
Philippine presence of China Radio International and other Chinese state media;
- Media partnership agreements;
- Free content and advertorials for local papers;
- Subsidized press trips;
- Leveraging political support in the media;
- Disinformation, censorship, and intimidation;
- Control over content-dissemination infrastructure;
- Dissemination of CCP (Chinese Communist Party) media norms, tactics, or government models; and
- Use of Chinese diaspora media.

Then too, amid the pandemic, China's Ambassador to the Philippines Huang Xilian wrote opinion pieces for major online newspapers, including four pieces for *The Manila Bulletin* and 15 for *The Manila Times*, mostly emphasizing the supposedly deepened Philippines-China friendship and solidarity, the quality and quantity of Chinese support, and the bright future of the relations. He also engaged in some tit-for-tat with the United States on accusations of China's alleged genocide in Xinjiang and use of might in the South China Sea.

During the Duterte administration, China and the Philippines entered into an official media communications cooperation. The agreement was between the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) and China's State Council Information Office (SCIO). Who or which party initiated the project is no longer clear for Kris Ablan, who was then PCOO Undersecretary.

"My memory is hazy," Ablan said in an interview. "I remember there were already exchanges between the countries, I think, meetings between China and the Philippine government. And then it was transferred to (PCOO) Secretary Andanar in terms of media and communications exchange, then it was handed to me. We had a template from the past and just fine-tuned it, sent it to the Chinese government, ironed things out, and then the signing. I don't know who really initiated, I think the meetings the President had with different governments then we were just assigned the communications component. And since I was in charge of international cooperation, we followed through."

The objective of the cooperation agreement was, according to Ablan, "for us, to improve government communications. Because China has (the) largest government media globally, that's why we wanted to learn from them. Our aim was to improve government media. For China, I think it was part of their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)."

The cooperation agreement had two components:

- **Media Exchange.** Members of PCOO and state-owned and -controlled media agencies like Radyo Pilipinas, People's Television (PTV), Philippine Information Agency (PIA) had media exchanges with their Chinese counterparts to understand how state media works – Internet, TV, radio, and publications. It involved tours of the facilities and interviews. Recalled Ablan: "I attended the first media exchange, which was five or six days, and then two more followed after that. Sometimes the programs would change. The second one involved a more in-depth training, they had modules." The training was for writers, videographers, and took some time.
- **Equipment donation.** China donated communication hardware, which included a number of radio equipment for Radyo Pilipinas stations that were delivered to its main office in PIA (Philippine Information Agency), and some to regional stations.

On top of these agreements with the Philippine government, China also managed to get some of its television and radio programs aired on both state-run and corporate-owned media. These include its first news program [“Chinese News TV,”](#) a weekday news program delivered in Mandarin, as well as in English and Filipino, on government-sequestered IBC 13 TV, and the Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ)-owned NET 25 since 2017. By June 2018, state-owned People’s Television Network also started airing Chinese TV series, documentaries, cartoons, and movies dubbed in the national language Filipino under its [“China TV Theater \(Esmaguél, 2018\).”](#)

Timeline of Philippines-China Media Cooperation

2016	<p>“Both sides agree to encourage mutual visits of media personnel, exchange of media products, cooperation in facilities, technologies and training between Chinese media and Philippine media including the People’s Broadcasting Corporation. The competent media authority of China is willing to enhance exchanges and cooperation with the Presidential Communication Office of the Philippines.” – Joint Statement of the Republic of the Philippines and the People’s Republic of China signed on 21 Oct 2016.</p> <p>During Duterte’s state visit to China, the PCOO signed MOUs with the SCIO and the Ministry of Information for enhanced media cooperation.</p>
2017	<p>February. China donated 450 radios to PCOO as part of a cooperation agreement, which includes government media and executive management training (via official exchanges and media training). Other commitments included help with the rebuilding of the PTV-4, Radyo ng Bayan and the Philippine News Agency, as well as annual scholarships for PCOO executives and employees</p>
	<p>PCOO Secretary Andanar issued Department Order 15 establishing a provisional social media practitioner accreditation system handled by the PCOO’s Social Media Office. Under DO 15, accreditation can only be issued to Filipino social media practitioners who are at least 18 years old and who have at least 5,000 followers on any social media platform. Under the order, a social media practitioner refers to “a person that maintains a publicly-accessible social media page, blog or website which generates content and whose principal advocacy is the regular dissemination of original news and/or opinion of interest.” PCOO started accrediting vloggers but as of 16 June 2022, Kris Ablan said that there was a policy in place, but none had been accredited because no one had applied yet.</p> <p>May. Andanar paid a visit to Chinese media outlets. He said he would like to share what he had learned in China with other ASEAN countries. He hoped both sides would be able to present a real image to the world.</p> <p>August. Vice minister of the State Council Information Office (SCIO) Guo Weimin in his meeting with Andanar in Manila stated China hopes to enhance media exchanges and build pragmatic cooperation with the Philippines to help create a bridge between the two countries and peoples. Guo led a Chinese media delegation to visit Manila between 18 and 19 August .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Philippines would send a media team to shoot documentary about China’s culture and the Silk Road to help Filipinos to better know Chinese culture and introduce the Belt and Road Initiative to the local community.

TIMELINE OF PHILIPPINES-CHINA MEDIA COOPERATION

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Chinese media delegation also exchanged views with its peers including People's Television (PTV), Philippine Broadcasting Service (PBS), Philippine News Agency (PNA), and the Philippine Information Agency (PIA). They expressed the wish to work closer with each other in sharing information and jointly producing programs for TV and broadcast. They also visited the Chinese embassy in the Philippines, Chinese enterprise of Huawei Technologies Phils. Inc. and APO Production Unit, Inc. <p>26 Nov. ASEAN-China ink media cooperation pact</p>
2018	<p>China TV program "Wow China" started airing over Philippine Broadcasting Service (PBS)</p> <p>May (for 2 weeks). Media officials and prominent journalists from the Philippines visited China for two weeks to learn about 'new media development' and 'socialist journalism with Chinese characteristics,' according to Freedom House 2020 report "Beijing's Global Megaphone."</p> <p>17 Sept. PCOO officials and the Philippine Embassy in Beijing met with officials of China's National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) to discuss how to enhance media cooperation and strengthen partnerships in relation to BRI. Here, Andanar also thanked China for the Php140 million worth of radio equipment and Php40-million funds for the establishment of government centers, as well as for China's leading news agencies' positive coverage of the Philippines. For NRTA's part, it talked about the signing of the MOU between PCOO and NRTA, China-ASEAN media exchanges, and enhanced media cooperation under BRI. NRTA also invited the Philippines and PCOO for the series of activities to be conducted in 2019 as part of the China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership, particularly on media exchanges.</p>
2019	<p>8 Nov. The two countries agreed to further enhance media cooperation. The PCOO, at this point, already has multiple bilateral media and communications agreements with the Chinese government, covering commitments to pursue personnel exchanges, workshops, seminars, information exchanges, re-broadcasts, joint production, and mutual visits.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Huang, meanwhile, looked forward to more exchanges in new media besides news exchanges and film cooperation, e.g. in the radio and new media. He also thanked the Duterte government for supporting Chinese journalists, especially when they are seeking requests for interviews, allowing them to have a "deeper" understanding of issues concerning the Philippines. "We saw our reports by our journalists in the Philippines from CCTV and CRI. From their reports, which are very newsworthy, [they] show us that they have a deeper understanding," he said. - Andanar thanked the CMG for the fair coverage of developments in the Philippines by CCTV, CGTN, CNR, and CRI, saying "We are very grateful for the commitment of CMG. I experience very good coverage from CCTV, CRI, whenever I go [to] different parts of the world." <p>The Chinese government donated broadcasting equipment to PCOO and state-owned radio station Philippine Broadcasting Service</p>

TIMELINE OF PHILIPPINES-CHINA MEDIA COOPERATION

2020	22 Sept. Facebook removed two separate networks for violating policy against coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB), one of which originated in China and the other in the Philippines. They posted in Chinese, Filipino, and English about global news and current events including Beijing's interests in the SCS, Hong Kong, pro-Duterte content, Rappler criticisms, OFWs, and praise and some criticism of China. The network particularly targeted the Philippines, where it actively interfered in Philippine politics and generated millions of digital interactions by promoting politicians favorable to China, including President Rodrigo Duterte
2022	30 Aug. Short video contest on Ph-Ch ties

Chinese News TV also aired on commercial ABS-CBN News Channel since 2021 ([Elemia, 2021](#)). The program was renamed "Chinatown News TV" and was first co-produced by the state-run NBN 4 (now PTV 4 or People's Television Network) in 2001 ([Embudo, 2021](#)). When aired on ABS-CBN on 12 April 2021, it received heavy backlash on social media, which forced the network to pull it out after just [two days](#). Filipino journalist Barnaby Lo, however, clarified it was "produced by Chinoys (we are Pinoys). So this is essentially a Filipino-produced Chinese, English, and Filipino language newscast. If anything, I think it should make Pinoys not of Chinese descent understand our diversity. Watch to see *ang galing mag-Ta-galog ng* anchors (the anchors are very fluent in Tagalog)" ([Madarang, 2021](#)).

CHINA'S INFLUENCE ON STATE MEDIA AGENCIES

1. Equipment donation helped state media modernization

Ablan said that the cooperation helped modernize the Philippines' state media. "If you check our radio stations pre-2016, we had equipment that were from the Marcos Sr. era," he said. "Part of the exchange was donation of radio equipment. Their donations were already used equipment, but compared to what we had, those second-hand donations were already a big leap forward for us."

2. Chinese model of state media way of working inspired PCOO to strengthen state media

PCOO also adopted what they deemed to be best practices that would also be good for Philippine state media.

"We tried to replicate whatever we could from the learning experience," said Ablan. "For example, they had their official wire agency (Xinhua), in the Philippines supposedly it's PNA. It was amazing because the radio agency, the news agency, TV – they all do ev-

everything. Their news had a broadcasting component. All agencies are practically doing the same thing, they try to reach out to one another. That's why we strengthened our radio component, the 'teleradyo' (tv-radio combined), our availability on Facebook. Back then, our Radyo Pilipinas or Radyo ng Bayan was only on radio while everyone else was already doing teleradyo. Actually, you need not go to China to do teleradyo, but that visit pushed our Director General to go full teleradyo and Facebook. And then, having seen Xinhua, we revived our PNA news wire, which has been forgotten for so long, based on the learnings of DG Gigi Agtay. And we also copied the look of Xinhua's master newsroom – which had the work stations in the middle and can be overseen from the second floor. Those are the examples I can recall."

PCOO made improvements as a result, but Ablan clarified that he was not sure if they were attributable to the training from China. He emphasized that PCOO also had partnerships with other countries from which they culled lessons and got benefits as well.

While the cooperation engagements, particularly that media exchange he joined, were for him definitely part of China's soft diplomacy to influence and win their hearts, Ablan said that the PCOO had already felt how state media had taken a backseat during the pre-Duterte years and needed to be strengthened. He added, "I think previous leaderships thought that private media would be able to deliver the news anyway. And then the government realized, especially during the height of social media, misinformation, disinformation by trolls who can overtake the messaging, sometimes it goes beyond the power of the private media. What more government media that has already let lose? This was never clearly stated but my understanding was, under Duterte and Andanan, our mission was to strengthen government media. We have to be proactive in countering fake news about the government. But that's about it, not to control state media. Should communications be private sector-led? To my understanding, government has to be there to protect its own interest and to communicate government message because of this landscape where anyone can be his or her own publicist."

3. Trolling and disinformation

Freedom House traces the origin of troll farms to Russia and China in the past decade, accusing Russia of pioneering it in 2016 to influence the U.S. elections that year.

The Philippines is one of 30 out of 65 countries identified to have also used troll armies during its 2016 elections ([Ayres, 2017](#)); Duterte admitted having spent more than PHP 10 million (US\$183,000) on this for his electoral campaign, but not during his presidency ([Bencito, 2017](#)).

In 2020, though, Duterte slammed Facebook for taking down two networks that he said were airing "government advocacy" messages. The two networks were taken down for

coordinated inauthentic behavior. One was traced to the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), the other to a group of individuals in China's Fujian province. The first network contained posts against the opposition, activists, and the ideals of communism; the other one contained posts in Filipino expressing support for Duterte and his daughter Sara Duterte-Carpio ([Lalu, 2020](#)).

While political "trolling" has been around even before the Internet, and in transitional and mature democracies like Turkey and the United States respectively, a high level of intensity has come to characterize its online version – so intense that it has caused anxiety and panic among not just ordinary social-media users but also journalists and commentators ([Cabanes, 2017](#)), especially women ([Tandoc, 2021](#)).

"Patriotic trolling" has been used to portray government critics as traitors, foreign collaborators, used by drug lords (for those critical of the war on drugs), and thereby undermining their legitimacy. "Volunteers" dubbed "influencers" tended to retaliate against those deemed disrespectful to Duterte with online bullying such as rape threats against female critics and physical assault – which, according to Duterte's campaigner, was beyond their control. Besides leading to a "chilling effect," online and offline attacks or trolling have created a social divide between the "Dutertards" and "Yellowtards" (the liberals, particularly Duterte's predecessor) ([Sombatpoonsiri, J., 2018](#)).

Maria Ressa, CEO of the online Philippine publication Rappler, blames social-media platforms Facebook and Twitter for the destruction of democracy in the country. A 2021 UNESCO research paper ([Posetti, 2021](#)) meanwhile found evidence on the role of political actors including presidents and elected representatives, party officials and members in instigating and fueling online violence against women journalists; and reinforced by partisan mainstream and fringe news media – which escalate online violence to psychological injury and even offline harassment and assault.

In 2021, Ablan and PCOO Secretary Martin Andanar faced questions from the Senate over allegations of funding troll farms after the Commission on Audit (COA) flagged its PHP70.3-million (US\$1.3 million) expenditure in salaries of 375 contractual employees (71.7 percent of PCOO's total regular workforce, and 25 percent of the 1,479 contractual employees of the Palace's communications group) for information dissemination in 2020.

COA had noted that the situation was unjustifiable due to the "absence of the agency's written policy guidelines on availing (itself of) the services of COS (contract of service) personnel, justification for the need to hire (them) and incomplete documentation of disbursement vouchers." COA also pointed out that the agency's accomplishment reports did not list actual tasks performed for a specific period, and instead contained general statements and accomplishments that were "repetitively reported every month."

PCOO officials denied allegations that the contractuals were trolls, saying they were “social-media specialists” who designed and uploaded infographics that helped explain to the public the national ID program (PhilSys), COVID-19 vaccines, and the government’s pandemic response ([Aurelio, 2021](#)). COA, however, said in its audit report that the PCOO was unable to hire personnel for the monitoring division of the PCOO PhilSys Project team ([Rosario, 2021](#)), while Bayan Muna lawmaker Ferdinand Gaité observed that the PCOO social-media account contained very few infographics and the contractual personnel’s accomplishment reports were very generic ([Aurelio, 2021](#)).

“That realization (of the need to strengthen state media) was not something that came out from the China experience,” said Ablan, “but more from the six-year experience, like whenever faced with arguments that we have trolls, about the drug war and all that stuff. As a government communicator, you push yourself because anyone can interpret the news and make their own spin. I saw the wisdom behind strengthening government media given how fast news spreads, go viral, so government has to be there to issue the clarification – so we needed strong social-media presence, we needed content creators to push out the information and defend ourselves.”

ENHANCED CHINA IMAGE IN STATE MEDIA REPORTAGE

But is having China in one’s newsroom that benign? Freedom House doesn’t seem to think so; it has sounded the alarm after observing that China had taken in government officials and journalists from 75 countries in the last five years, alluding to them as “Beijing’s Global Megaphone” ([Mangosing, 2020](#)).

It cited Pew Research Center surveys from 2018 and 2019 that showed mostly positive public views of China in the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia than in Europe, North America, Northeast Asia, and Australia; and of President Xi Jinping in Russia, the Philippines, Tunisia, Nigeria and Kenya. It also said that Chinese influence campaigns overseas had accelerated since 2017 via censorship, propaganda, and control over content-delivery systems.

Ablan, however, said, “(I) didn’t feel that they were influencing us when it came to reporting about China. Their goal was to shock and awe us at how strong their government media was. For me as a public administrator, it was a motivation for us to strengthen, not to be like them, but to improve government communication because it had really been neglected.”

Similarly, state media journalist Gregggy Araneta – who spent months (Feb-Dec 2018) in China for a media-study program – sees nothing wrong with China trying to influence Philippine media.

In an interview with Rappler, he said: "I don't see anything wrong in terms of Chinese influence on Philippine media. Western countries have a huge influence on our media, and most of us like them. Why don't we allow other countries like China to influence us in terms of media knowledge, exchange, and culture? Most of our culture, practices are similar to China's... Our visit to various places made me realize how the culture of Filipinos is close to Chinese. I also commend the leadership of China in alleviating poverty, particularly in the smallest villages" ([Elemia, C., 2021](#)).

Regardless of China's efforts, Freedom House found that in 2022, it was still far from achieving its goals in the Philippines, which earned a "resilient" rating with a high score of 50/85 amid Beijing's high media-influencing efforts ([Han, 2022](#)).

Freedom House points to strong media resilience, investigative reporting capacity and culture, diverse print and online media environment, vibrant civil society work on press freedom, media transparency requirement, and some more China-specific resilience factors: (i) growing media and civil society attention on Chinese influence; (ii) editorial pushback against such attempts; (iii) existence of [reporting guidelines on China](#); (iv) strong public skepticism; and (v) political pushback.

Journalist Raymund Villanueva affirms Freedom House's findings of China's continuing little success in influencing the media and public perception, saying that it "can count on the Philippine media to give them the benefit of the doubt, but of course not on what they really want in terms of the South China Sea, even if they show how much they have developed our islands there."

Villanueva did remember the term "socialist journalism with Chinese characteristics," but says that is "overreach." He said that in the Chinese-sponsored tour that he got to join, they were not forced to write anything, and that those who did were not censored or required to be uncritical. He also said that the Filipino journalists, or at least those in their batch, were intelligent and nationalistic enough to comprehend the politics behind how the tour was designed and to not be swayed by China's ulterior motives.

On the [Guidelines on Reporting on China](#) released by the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) on 16 March 2022, Villanueva (a former NUJP officer and still an active member) said that they are just like any other guidelines that they had published in the past.

"It's just a reminder of how not to be compromised because the issue of China is an issue of sovereignty," he said. "It's like how we have published a manual on journalist safety, or on reporting about suicide or on vulnerable women and children. It's like telling ourselves to be reminded and mindful of making sure the way we report does not compromise us or our report. It's a comment but it's not a full-blown protest against China. When we protest, we issue statements addressed directly to China." He added that the manual was

released, albeit already belatedly, in response to the increasing activities of China and media attention accorded them.

DUTERTE'S PIVOT OUTCOMES

From 2010 to 2016 under the Aquino III administration, the Philippines still had the lowest levels of Chinese investments in Southeast Asia, and no major Chinese state or private firms had made capital investments in the Philippines except for the State Grid Corporation of China (Camba 2021).

Duterte's decision to pursue better relations with Beijing was apparently driven by his desire to access more loans and direct investments from Chinese policy banks and entities. After his state visit to Beijing in October 2016, Duterte bragged that he had bagged US\$24 billion in new financing; US\$9 billion in loans/public financing; and US\$24 billion in investments/business-to-business contracts.

Duterte had warmly embraced China in the hopes that he would be able to strike a deal on joint exploration of disputed regions in the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea and leverage Beijing's massive infrastructure and investment plan to support his own BBB infrastructure plan. But none of these dreams materialized. Worse, Beijing even amped up its assertiveness in the WPS, which led to Duterte's change of heart as early as June 2020, when he finally authorized the DFA to call upon China to recognize the 2016 PCA ruling on the disputed waters. He later said that the ruling was "beyond compromise" and that any attempts to undermine it would be rejected and would lead to a restoration of ties with the United States (Grossman 2021).

Duterte's own account of the relations with China in his Final Report was not as warm and ardent as his pronouncements early in his term. In it, all he mentioned was that he had five visits to China that resulted in agreements in various spheres of cooperation including infrastructure, education, and science and technology, among others.

On the territorial issue, all that Duterte's accommodative policy and the improved bilateral ties had achieved was the resumption of talks in October 2016, followed by Beijing granting Philippine fishers access to the Scarborough Shoal (within the Philippine EEZ), which has been under effective Chinese control since April 2012. China has neither tempered its pressure on Philippine-claimed features nor reduced its military presence in the region (Chang 2021; Pitlo 2021; Ernst 2022). Manila's accommodative policy -- the Duterte (and Arroyo) administration's non-insistence on Philippine territorial rights -- in fact enabled China to use cooperation projects to consolidate its 'illegal' territorial claims (Ernst 2022). China has also used its economic leverage and punitive economic measures to diminish Philippines' diplomatic legroom (as it has with Japan, South Korea, and Australia) -- for

example in 2012, when Philippine banana exports to and tourist influx from China suffered amid the Panatag (Scarborough) Shoal standoff, pressuring the country to seek alternative markets (Pitlo 2021). Overall, the pivot to China only resulted in the power asymmetry between China and the Philippines to be maintained, if not increased (Baviera and Arugay 2021; Chang 2021).

The more important question that scholars raise, however, is whether the growing exposure to Chinese market, capital, and aid may engender dependence with potentially adverse consequences should relations go south, especially given that the China market, with or without sea tensions, has become a measure/indicator of the state of Philippine commodity exports and tourism (Pitlo 2021), and whether they bring about developmental outcomes.

For labor leader Elmer Labog and the workers' movement, the question to always answer when dealing with China -- or any foreign government for that matter -- is: "Development for whom?" In the case of Kaliwa-Kanan dam, Labog said that they do monitor some Chinese workers' presence, but that becomes secondary to the issue of whether the Filipino people really do need the project. He pointed out, "The indigenous people in the area and purported beneficiaries of the water to be generated by the dam have consistently opposed and actively fought the project, so who will the project serve? China should be sensitive to the rights and interests of the Filipino people. It should not be concerned solely on how to profit from them."

PROSPECTS UNDER MARCOS JR.

As things stand, however, there may be little change from how Duterte had first dealt with China and his successor's own China policies. So far, while Marcos Jr. has consistently made seemingly strong pronouncements against ceding a single inch of Philippine territory to China, he also recognizes it as the Philippines strongest partner and has announced shifting the relations to a higher gear. For some analysts, this is no different from Duterte's pro-China stance.

The Marcoses' strong political and personal ties with China are believed to have shaped Marcos Jr.'s views on the WPS issue. Marcos Sr. forged diplomatic ties with China in 1975, making the Philippines one of the first countries to do so. The family has since maintained cordial relations with Chinese officials and profited enormously from China's economic rise and it still benefits from close ties with Beijing. Through investments such as the Consulate in the Marcos hometown Laoag in Ilocos Norte, China has cultivated personal relationships with President Marcos Jr. as well as with his sister, Senator Imee Marcos, and her son, Ilocos Norte Governor Matthew Manotoc, that, [political analyst Luke Lischin believed](#) "will be useful for influencing the administration's China policy.". Also in 2021 and 2022, Marcos Jr.'s

mother [Imelda was given the Hall of Fame award](#) by the Association for the Promotion of Philippines-China Understanding (APPCU), a novel award-giving body that recognizes individuals that have contributed significantly to stronger Philippines China ties" ([Bilyonaryo.com, 2021](#)).

Yet, with Marcos Jr.'s revival of warm ties with the United States, political analyst Bobby Tuazon says it is evident that "Bongbong is torn between pursuing the favorable economic cooperation with China while trying to be friendly with the U.S. on a defense alliance that is primarily targeted against China. That definitely is the dilemma for the Philippines." In any case, Tuazon is convinced that China is not claiming the entire WPS, and that the militarized artificial islands in the WPS are not aimed at the Philippines but at the United States, which has the most military bases globally -- most of which encircle China.

Zambales fisher and fishers' rights advocate Bobby Roldan, however, said that that he has yet to see any clear plans from Manila. Filipino fishers want China out in the same way that they want the United States out of the WPS – ensuring that Filipinos have full control to address the country's needs, he said. They want to see increased Philippine Coast Guard/ Navy presence and feel the full fishing freedom they used to enjoy in the WPS.

The fishers, Roldan said, welcome news of the Philippine Coast Guard accompanying fisherfolk in Scarborough. Roldan's group, PAMALAKAYA, lauded the [10 January 2023 Supreme Court's favorable ruling on a petition to declare unconstitutional the 2005 JMSU](#) entered into by the Macapagal-Arroyo administration. This, Pamalakaya said, should deter Marcos Jr. from pursuing similar undertakings with China or any other foreign corporation.

Pamalakaya [rejected](#) China's reported partnership proposal with fishing villages. It said that it is impossible for the direct victims of Chinese aggression to enter into a pact with their aggressors.

END NOTES

- 1 Security expert Lucio Pitlo III notes that Beijing had, in recent years, employed various terms to describe its burgeoning relations with an increasing number of countries: “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership” such as with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Senegal, and Namibia; “strategic and cooperative partnership” with Afghanistan, Brunei, India, South Korea, and Sri Lanka and; “comprehensive strategic partnership” with diverse countries as Germany, United Kingdom, France, Australia, New Zealand, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Mexico, and Brazil, among others. The use of “comprehensive strategic cooperation” to describe Philippines-China relations is unprecedented. Whether that suggests exceptional importance attached to the renewed ties with Manila or a consideration of the archipelagic country’s unique domestic dynamics and geopolitical setting is up for debate.
- 2 13 with Filipino businessmen and groups, three with Americans, and two with Japanese, per Rappler’s tally based on Palace press releases and inside information.
- 3 Baviera and Arugay 2021
- 4 Mendoza and Cruz 2020 in Cruz and Juliano 2021
- 5 Carpio 2020 in Cruz and Juliano 2021
- 6 Lecher et al 2020; Gamboa 2020 in Cruz and Juliano 2021
- 7 Mendoza, Bertulfo and Cruz 2018 in Cruz and Juliano 2021
- 8 Manhit 2017; Chanco 2018; Cruz 2019 in Cruz and Juliano 2021
- 9 Park 2020
- 10 Balboa, 2020
- 11 Baviera and Arugay 2021

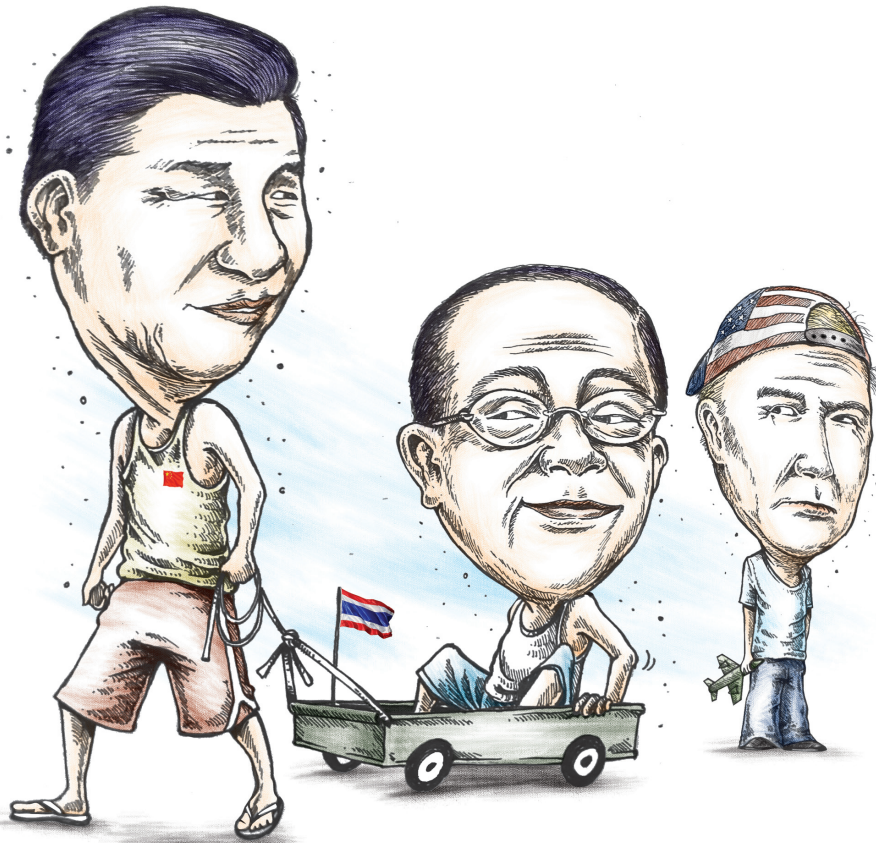
- 12 Pitlo 2021
- 13 Camba in Rivas, In Charts: How Duterte’s love affair with China shaped the PH economy 2021; Jiang 2022
- 14 Chalmers 2016
- 15 GMA News, JST, Reuters 2016
- 16 ABS-CBN News 2016
- 17 Philippine Star 2016
- 18 AFP 2016
- 19 Reuters 2016
- 20 Reuters 2016
- 21 AFP 2016
- 22 AFP 2016
- 23 <https://opinion.inquirer.net/157336/marcos-jr-the-great-rebranding>
- 24 <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/witness/2021/10/19/manila-lockdown-one-of-the-longest-covid-lockdowns-in-the-world> 2 Dec 2022
- 25 According to a University of the Philippines Marine Science Institute (UP MSI) [primer](https://www.rappler.com/environment/fisherfolk-fighting-for-food-security-depths-west-philippine-sea/), the WPS stretches “from the coasts of Northern Luzon in Batanes, to Mindoro, and to the south of Palawan, to offshore environments of Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal), and the Kalayaan Island Group (KIG).” <https://www.rappler.com/environment/fisherfolk-fighting-for-food-security-depths-west-philippine-sea/>
- 26 Known as “Huangyan Dao” (黄岩岛) in China and “Panatag Shoal” or “Bajo de Masinloc” in the Philippines and is a coral reef 116.2 nautical miles from the archipelagic baseline of the Philippine island of Luzon and 448.2 nautical miles from China’s baseline point 29 (Jiapengliedao) near Hong Kong; claimed by China as part of its Zhongsha Islands, which are covered by its 1958 Declaration of the Government of the People’s Republic of China’s Territorial Sea and 1992 Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone. On 27 November 2012, the Standing Committee of Hainan Provincial People’s Congress revised “The Hainan Provincial

Regulation on the Control of Coastal Border Security, to include Spratly, Paracel, and Scarborough (The South China Sea Arbitration Award of 12 July 2016).

- 27 On 10 May 2012, the Fishery Bureau of Nanhai District under the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture announced a fishing moratorium in the South China Sea, including the Scarborough Shoal and applies even to all foreign ships. Another fishing moratorium was imposed in the summer of 2015, for which the Philippines filed a Note Verbale (The South China Sea Arbitration Award of 12 July 2016)
- 28 A study by U.S. scientist Prof. John McManus cited in the PCA 2016 Arbitration Award finds that China is responsible for at least 39 km² of damage from shallow dredging, 69 km² of damage from giant clam harvest using propellers, and 99 percent of damage to coral reefs within the Greater Spratly Islands (The South China Sea Arbitration Award of 12 July 2016).

China and Thailand

Nations as siblings, family?





Fast Facts : THAILAND

Official Name : Kingdom of Thailand

Capital : Bangkok

Geography : 76 provinces and two special local territories – Bangkok and Pattaya

Land area (2019) : 513,120 sq km

Population (2019) : 66.6 million

Head of government : Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha

National language : Thai

Currency : Thai Baht (THB)

Gross domestic product : 16,879 billion baht (GDP) (2019)

GDP per capita (2019) : 228,373 baht

Source:

<https://www.eyeonasia.gov.sg/asean-countries/know/overview-of-asean-countries/asean-a-regional-profile/>

Introduction

“China, Thai, not apart, but siblings.”

Thai government agencies have often proclaimed this to describe the state of relations between Beijing and Bangkok. This notion of familial ties has repeatedly been bolstered by frequent visits to China of Thai royal family members – except for the current monarch, King Maha Vajiralongkorn (King Rama X) – as well as by senior state officials and leaders of Thailand’s Chinese diaspora conglomerates.

In the last decade or so, however, Thailand and China seem to have evolved from having a regular sibling relationship to acting at times like conjoined twins. While Thailand has tried to maintain a foreign policy that would enable it to be open to relations to both China and the West, the latest power grab by the military has distanced it from the latter and pushed it closer to Beijing, with which it has struck deals meant to enhance both of their economic ambitions. Now that it has an autocratic regime in place, however, Thailand seems to mirroring Communist Party-led China in terms of a style of governance that is opaque and rigid, and tolerant only of its supporters that include the monarchist elite. This in turn has allowed the emergence of a system prone to abuse by those in power, as well as the increasing number of questionable projects and deals between Thailand’s military leaders and their like-minded counterparts in China.

Since the Han and Tang dynasties that ruled China from 202 B.C. to 906 A.D., Thailand and China have had cordial relations in terms of trade and diplomacy through their royal families and peoples. Modern Thailand launched official diplomatic ties with China on 1 July 1975, just four years after the United States opened its diplomatic doors to China. In 1978, when China’s paramount leader Deng Xiaoping reopened talks between Beijing and Southeast Asian nations, the first country he visited in the region was Thailand.

The Thai government has repeatedly reiterated its “One-China Policy” through the decades. In recent years, Thailand has also sought, sealed, and secured record values of Chinese investments, aid, loans, and bilateral agreements from China, across major sectors of the economy, defense and security, state and private media, and education.

In 1999, Thailand became the first Southeast Asian country to sign the Joint Communiqué on a Plan of Cooperation for the 21st Century. Years later, Thai Premier Thaksin Shinawatra would negotiate for action plans based on the communiqué to broaden and deepen bilateral ties between Beijing and Bangkok. Before he could complete his goal, however, Thaksin was toppled by a military coup on 19 September 2006 that was led by Surayuth Chulanond, then the supreme commander of the Thai Royal Army. (Surayuth is presently a Privy Councilor to King Maha.)

In the 2006 coup's wake, the military government sustained talks with Beijing and secured the signing of a process-verbal to launch the first Joint Action Plan on Thailand Strategic Cooperation with China for the period 2007 to 2012. [With Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra in office, Thailand and China in 2012](#) issued a Joint Declaration that announced the establishment of Sino-Thai Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

"Bending with the wind" has been proclaimed to describe Thailand's foreign-policy framework since then. Thailand has sought to always maintain good relations with both the United States and China. But the latest coup in 2014 led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha – then commander-in-chief of the Thai Royal Army – toppled Yingluck and caused a rift in Bangkok's relations with Washington. Prayuth's National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) assumed office in 2014, after year-long protest actions in Bangkok by the so-called "yellow shirts" or royalists to the monarchy. He launched a new constitution in 2017, became concurrently the defense minister and prime minister in 2019, reactivated the *lèse-majesté* law against activists in 2020, and now stands for election as a member of parliament and prime minister in the May 2023 general polls.

At least 12 military-led coups have succeeded in Thailand since 1932. In all instances, the King's blessings sealed the success of these coups. Seven other coup attempts, rebellions, and internal purges launched by an individual or groups of officers that lacked the King's blessings all failed.

Prayuth's 2014 coup came at a transitional period, and after the death of King Bhumibol (King Rama IX). Prayuth set up military officers as Cabinet members and ushered in more favors for Thai conglomerates – as well as more human-rights violations by the authorities, along with the arrest and detention of civil-society leaders and critics.

Statements of [condemnation](#) of the coup flew fast and thick from the United States, the European Union, some members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and other countries. Washington [called for the immediate restoration of democracy](#), while [other governments](#) also imposed [a ban or reduced engagement](#) on trade, aid, and military training and funding for Thailand. One such measure led to downgraded U.S. participation in Cobra Gold, the largest multilateral defense exercise in Asia.

China, in contrast, voiced support for the putschists. It published [a joint press communique](#) with Thailand reiterating China's understanding of the political situation and expressing support for the Thai government to implement national reforms in promoting economic growth.

Thailand's military government expressed appreciation for China's understanding, launched its 'Thailand 4.0' economic policy, which emphasizes research and development, and leaned more and more toward Beijing for aid, trade, and support. In counterbalancing the pressure from the United States, the Thai military government saw in China a partner in major infrastructure and development projects, and a power guarantor. China has provided diplomatic cover for the junta's violations of human rights, press freedom, and rule of law via its foreign policy of non-intervention. China was [the first country that had its officials visit Thailand after the coup](#) and enter into agreements on several projects with the military government.

Bilateral relations have proved beneficial to both Beijing and Bangkok. Yet Thailand has maintained a foreign policy that avoids having to choose between China and the United States, striving instead to remain important and relevant to both. How to deal with Thailand best is therefore a choice that both China and the United States must also make.

CLOSE TIES WITH THE MONARCHY

Diplomatic relations between Thailand and China have been marked by ups and downs across long periods. But even through World War II and the Cold War, and all the way up to the present, the "older-younger sibling" relationship between the two countries has endured.

The aphorism that ["Thai and China are siblings"](#) was first used to enhance Thai-Sino relations in 1975. Since then, politicians and diplomats of both Thailand and China have harked on the theme repeatedly for effect. For instance, in a speech he gave at the Thailand-China Investment Forum in Bangkok in November 2022, Thai Prime Minister Prayuth said that Thailand is eager to cooperate with China to enhance cooperation in every dimension, reasoning that the two countries are "siblings."

Two years earlier, in the #nnevy incident in which Thai fans questioned the 'One-China' policy, the Chinese Embassy in Thailand had published a statement saying that the principle has been consistently recognized and supported by the Thai government and the Thai general public. It also described China and Thailand as "one family," and noted that their relationship dates back to ancient times. [Each country has extended a hand to the other](#), it added, and the Thai royal family, government, and various social sectors have helped China during the pandemic.

In truth, the aphorism somehow defines the relations between Thailand and China on such matters as trade, diplomacy, and culture. Two factors in particular, though, have served as the bedrock of the ties that bind Beijing and Bangkok: the Thai monarchy and the Chinese diaspora in Thailand.

While China no longer has a monarchy, its leaders in the last half century have had cordial ties with the Thai royal family. In 2019, the Chinese government even bestowed Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn the Friendship Medal – the highest honor given by the Chinese government to foreigners – in a ceremony celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The Princess has kept her visits to China as annual events, on invitation of the Chinese government. Her first official trip to China was in 1981 and since then, she has made [at least 40 visits](#) and been to nearly every one of its provinces.

The most controversial yet among the Princess’s China visits was the one she made in February 2022 when [she was invited to attend the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics](#), even as public criticism swirled around rights abuses against the Uyghurs and other minority groups in China.

The Thai monarchy, for its part, has always extended a cordial letter to Beijing in celebration of China National Day, as well as many other letters to offer assistance or condolences to China on particular issues, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although Thailand is a constitutional monarchy, Thais traditionally revere their royal ruler and bestow him utmost respect. Since 2017, however, King Maha (Vajiralongkorn, Rama X) has also gained direct control of the Crown Property Bureau or CPB, which is estimated to cover up to US\$30 billion in real estate and other investments of the monarchy. By law, the CPB’s income remains secret, and nearly all its transactions tax-free. By most accounts, the CPB is Thailand’s largest conglomerate, making King Maha one of the richest monarchs in the world – and in control of businesses in many sectors of the Thai economy.

Apart from Chinese officials engaging with members of the Thai monarchy, ethnic Chinese Thais have also been frequent visitors to the Palace and royal gatherings. Among them is [Dhanin Cheeravanont who was the first foreign investor in China](#) after Deng Xiaoping reopened the economy in 1978. The owner of Choroen Phokaphan Group (CPG),¹ Dhanin holds foreign investor certificate No. 001 in Shenzhen.

Dhanin has attended several business forums held by China, including [Boao Forum for Asia 2018, an official celebration marking 40 years of “reform and opening up,”](#) and [the Fifth Congress of the China Federation of Overseas Chinese Entrepreneurs in 2019](#). In Thailand, Dhanin has reportedly made donations to the monarchy.² On many occasions, he and

other CPG officials have been endorsed by the Thai Privy Council to visit with the royal family, together with their respective partners.

Chinese Thais – or Thai Chinese, as they usually refer to themselves – like Dhanin have successfully assimilated into Thai society, with many even becoming prominent in business and in politics. It is difficult to determine just how many they are, but estimates of their number run from 10 to 14 percent of the country's population of 71 million.

The Thai Chinese connect and engage through numerous trade and business associations that have allowed sharing of information on trade and investment among members in both Thailand and China.³ The more prominent of these associations are the Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association, the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association.

[The Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association](#) was established in 1993 by former Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who is of Sino-Thai and Lao descent. The association has at least 621 members from several societies, including high-level bureaucrats, politicians, and business executives, among them former Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak and Charoen Pokphand Group's Dhanin.

Its executive committee consists of influential people such as politician Phokin Pholkul of the Phuea Thai party; former Palang Pracharath party's Suchart Tanchaoren, First Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives; Uthai Shinawatra, Deputy Permanent Secretary of Defense and former Advisor to the Minister of the Interior of Thailand; and Paisal Puechmongkol, former Advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister.

The association has [six management committees](#) – military and police, Thai-China relationship education, economics, sibling-like relationship activities, ASEAN-China investment, and culture – all of them packed with politicians, police and military officers, and businesspeople. Their roles include coordinating with like-minded Chinese business groups and involving the latter in the association's policy and decision-making processes.

By all indications, the Thai monarchy, Chinese-Thai businesspersons, and the Chinese government are strong when bundled together as they confer on each one legitimacy and support in various ways. Their legitimacy is somehow affirmed by Thai pro-royalist groups that view see China as a cordial partner, and the United States as a hostile entity. To these groups, the United States meddles in Thai domestic politics and poses a threat to Thai sovereignty. In 2014, this anti-U.S. narrative [circulated on the Internet among Thais](#), especially Thailand's royalist groups. Today pro-royalist groups have foisted this anti-U.S. narrative to challenge criticisms from pro-democracy movement activists who are critics of the government and the monarchy.

THAI-CHINA MEDIA COOPERATION

Parallel to the rise in the number of Thai-China associations has been the emergence of media cooperation between China and Thailand.

In recent years, many Thai media outlets have forged content-sharing agreements with China's state media outlets, including Xinhua, *China Daily*, and the China Media Group or CMG. Some of the agreements have been facilitated by the Thai-Chinese Journalist Association or TCJA. Officially organized on 30 January 2015,⁴ TCJA reportedly aims to build good relationships between the two countries' media outlets in information exchange, cooperation, and news-sharing to present news swiftly and neutrally.

TCJA's formation was led by China Radio International (CRI), which invited Thai journalists who know China well to discuss news-sharing and other joint activities. Phuwanat Na Songkhla, an editor of Bangkok Today Online and Bangkok Wealth& Biz, became the association's president. He noted, "Thai journalists usually receive news from the West, which does not correct China's image. Therefore, receiving direct news from China is to seek news in all aspects. The association's main roles are organizing Chinese language courses for Thai journalists, holding conferences about China, and coordinating with the Chinese Embassy to Thailand."⁵

Structure of the Thai Chinese Journalists Association (TCJA)

PRESIDENT (2021 - 2022)		PHUWANAT NA SONGKHLA		
Committee of the Board				
Positions	Thai		China	
	Name	Company	Name	Company
Vice President	Mr.Jacky Sae-Chen	Bangkok International Times	Mrs.Liao Li	Foreign Cooperation Director of China Media Group (CMG) Asia Pacific
Vice President	Mr.Kriangkrai Buasri	Dailynews	Mr.Ming Da Jun	Chief of Xinhua News Agency Bangkok Bureau
Secretary	Mrs.Thitapa Songpao	Thairath	Mr.Sun Guang Yong	Chief Correspondent of People's daily Thailand Bureau
Treasurer	Mr.Pipat Nawasawat	Corehoon (core stocks) magazine	-	-
Committee	Mr.Chaiwat Wanitchwatthana	The Leader Asia	Mr.Shi Guang	Bangkok Bureau Chief from China Report Press

Structure of the Thai Chinese Journalists Association (TCJA)

PRESIDENT (2021 - 2022)		PHUWANAT NA SONGKHLA		
Committee of the Board				
Positions	Thai		China	
	Name	Company	Name	Company
	Mrs.Prakongjit Chaichana	(News One) ASTV	Mr.Wang Guo An	Chief of China News Service Thailand Bureau
	Mr.Kobkij Pradittha-pholphanich	Chinese-Thai news and the dean of the Faculty of Communication Arts at Dhurakij Pundit University	Mr.Fu Zhi Gang	Chief Correspondent of Guangming Daily Bangkok Bureau
	-	-	Mr.Su Wen Tao	CEO of China International Broadcasting Network Thailand (CIBN)

Source: <http://www.tcjapress.com/คณะกรรมการสมาคม/>

For sure, though, China has also been promoting similar media exchanges in other countries. At [the 21st ASEAN-China Summit](#) on 14 February 2019 in Singapore, a resolution designated 2019 to be the ASEAN-China Year of Media Exchanges. The summit had been held to elevate all aspects of “strategic partnership” between the Southeast Asian regional association and China.

It’s uncertain how Thailand’s efforts to achieve this compare with those of other ASEAN members. In any case, Thailand has been busy with its [concept of “Advancing Partnership for Sustainability”](#) that involves co-production of documentaries for television, organizing media seminars in Thailand, facilitation and support of media coverage, TV documentary exchange, and ASEAN-China cooperation in the training of public relations personnel to support communication in the digital age. And by facilitating and supporting media coverage, China has succeeded in directly broadcasting and publishing its state-media content across Thai media platforms.

In late 2019, several Thai media outlets signed a [news-sharing agreement with Chinese state-owned media outlet Xinhua](#). These include Voice Online, Manager Online, Sanook, INN, Thailand Today, state broadcaster NBT, Matichon Group, Shoot2China, UnderstandingChina, Mono29, Business Today, Bangkok Wealth & Biz, Smart SME, and Mthai.

Similarly, some [Thai media outfits have content-sharing deals with their counterparts from countries other than China](#). *The Nation*, for example, has its own content-sharing deal with the Asia News Network. [Channel 5](#) has entered into information sharing agreements with the state-affiliated media not only of China, but also of Iran and Russia – the so-called “[axis of authoritarianism](#).”

News-Sharing Agreements with Chinese Media Outlets

CHINESE MEDIA	THAI MEDIA
Xinhua	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In 2019, 12 Thai media outlets – Voice Online, Manager Online, Sanook, INN, Thailand Today, State broadcaster NBT, Matchon Group, Shoot2China, Understanding China, Mono29, Business Today, Bangkok Wealth&Biz, Smart SME, and Mthai ● In 2020, Channel 3 ● In 2021, Top News
China Daily	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Nation
China Media Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Channel 5

The standard agreement inked by Chinese media with the Thais says that Chinese-media outlets would share their news for free without further cost and burden on Thai journalists or their agencies. According to a journalist from the pro-democracy Thai media outfit VOICE TV, the agreement allows the media outlet to present news “from the other side.”⁶ It also allows Thai media outlets to check facts easily in order to accurately present the news -- so that these do not present a false image of China, which may affect relations between Thailand and China.⁷

The agreements are usually signed on an annual basis. Apart from these, some programs on Thai media have reportedly been funded by the China Media Group, and in each show, the CMG program’s crew determines content for airing and publication.⁸

Declining revenues and receding audience shares in the Thai news industry may have facilitated the agreements. For the longest time, Thai journalists have relied on Western news via field correspondents and subscriptions to expensive wire-agency services. According to veteran journalist Pravit Rojanapruk of *Khaosod English*, Thai media outlets do not have adequate money to have their journalists stationed abroad.⁹

Some journalists do not see agreements such as those struck with the Chinese state media as a bad thing. They say that it has not hampered their work in reporting China-related news, including those on sensitive issues such as the One-China policy, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Other journalists say that they get better views when presenting news related to China, particularly about culture and business.¹⁰

But for some media outlets with a significant foreign audience, content-sharing agreements with China can damage their credibility, since these may lead to assumptions that they are over-reliant on Chinese state-owned media and no longer bother to consider other views.¹¹

GROWING CHINA PRESENCE IN THAILAND

It is against this backdrop that China for the last decade or so has become an important source of foreign direct investments (FDI) for Thailand, as well as a major exporter to Thailand and a major importer of Thai goods. Chinese direct investment to Thailand has progressively grown from 2015, when it ranked fifth place among FDI sources. In 2019, China soared to first place as Thailand's FDI source, surpassing Japan for the first time. China slipped to second place after Japan in 2020, but over the next five to 10 years, Bangkok is projecting that China will once again be No. 1, [according to a Bangkok Post interview with the Board of Investment deputy secretary general](#).

More granular data come from the [Observatory of Economic Complexity \(OEC\)](#), "the world's leading data visualization tool for international trade data" based out of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States. The "collective learning group" reported that in 2020, [China](#) exported US\$51 billion worth of goods to Thailand, notably "[Broadcasting Equipment](#) (US\$3.15B), [Computers](#) (\$1.49B), and [Coated Flat-Rolled Iron](#) (\$1.25B)."

In the last 25 years, OEC said, China's exports to Thailand have increased "at an annualized rate of 13.4 percent, from US\$2.22B in 1995 to US\$51B in 2020." China did not export any services to Thailand in 2020, even as Thailand exported US\$30.2 billion worth of goods to China, notably "[Synthetic Rubber](#) (\$2.18B), [Office Machine Parts](#) (\$2.09B), and [Other Fruits](#) (\$2B)." In the last 25 years, said OEC, Thailand's exports to China have increased "at an annualized rate of 11.9 percent, from \$1.82B in 1995 to \$30.2B in 2020." In 2020, [Thailand](#) exported services to [China](#) worth US\$2.93B, "with Travel (\$2.45B), Other business services (\$310M), and Transportation (\$133M) being the largest in terms of value."

By the latest available data on bilateral trade from the [World International Trade Solution](#) of the World Bank, the top markets for Thailand exports are the United States at US\$34.40 billion or 14.87 percent of total exports; China, US\$29.76 billion or 12.86 percent; Japan, US\$22.88 billion or 9.89 percent; Hong Kong, US\$1.29 billion or 4.88 percent; and Vietnam, US\$11.17 billion or 4.83 percent.

China, however, has edged out all the other countries as the top source of imports to Thailand. Based on 2020 data, China brought in US\$49.64 billion worth of goods to the Thai market or 24 percent of the latter's total import bill. Japan's imports to Thailand by comparison were at US\$27.71 billion or 13.34 percent; United States, US\$15.13 billion or 7.2

percent; Malaysia, US\$10.2 billion or 4.65 percent; and other Asian countries, US\$8.2 billion or 3.95 percent.

Meanwhile, Chinese tourists have been visiting Thailand in ever-growing droves, and topped the country's foreign-arrival list [between 2015 and 2020](#). During this period, around 42 million Chinese visited Thailand and tourism industry-related revenue accounted for about a fifth of the country's GDP. In 2019, The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) began offering E-Visas at the Royal Thai Embassy in Beijing, making China the first country to have these before they were gradually offered in other countries. [According to Consular Affairs Department Director General Chattri Archjananun](#), China was chosen as the launch pad for the initiative since it was the source of the largest group of foreign nationals seeking visas to enter Thailand.

But China has been bringing more than people, goods, and investments to Thailand. According to AidData, China from 2001 to 2018 provided Thailand at least 53 various aid, grants, loans, and technical-assistance programs worth billions of dollars for big and small projects, such as a high-speed railway, wind farm, a landmark waterfront construction, a commercial joint-defense facility, as well as disaster relief, lending support for local charities, educational scholarships, assistance to the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, computers for students, communication technology equipment, assistance from DNA experts, and the establishment of about a dozen Confucius Institutes, among others.

VACCINE DIPLOMACY IN THAILAND

One of Beijing's more significant philanthropic gestures toward Thailand came at the height of a pandemic that began, ironically enough, in China. In 2021, Year Two of the COVID-19 pandemic, Thailand was still struggling to supply vaccines to all those who needed it.

Among the reasons for the vaccine shortfall was Thai government mismanagement. Bangkok had banked on only AstraZeneca vaccines that it assumed would be delivered in time by Siam Bioscience, which has [King Maha Vajiralongkorn](#), with his 48 million shares, among its major shareholders.

The company was founded in 2009 by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej to produce biopharmaceuticals and improve public health. In November 2020, it signed a letter of intent with the Thai Health Ministry and AstraZeneca to produce [at least 26 million doses that would be distributed among among Thais by mid-2021](#).

The budget was THB 6 million (US\$180,000). The government decided against buying from other suppliers, but then Siam Bioscience later sent a letter saying that it could not produce all the required vaccine doses by the date specified in the contract. This obviously

had many Thais upset and worried, among them [Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit](#), leader of the disbanded Future Forward Party, who streamed on Facebook Live his criticisms of the government's handling of the vaccines project. For that, Thanathorn was accused of violating *lèse-majesté* – which carries a maximum penalty of 15 years imprisonment – and cyber laws in January 2021.

Thailand shortly afterward became a battleground for vaccine diplomacy. When Bangkok started looking for foreign vaccine sources, China promptly stepped up, donating its very own Sinovac. Notably, its import procedure was less complicated than Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson, which all had to deal with huge demands around the world.

Refusing to be outdone by China, [the United States donated](#) 1.5 million Pfizer doses to Thailand. [In total](#), four countries donated COVID-19 vaccines to Thailand by these volumes: China, 6.5 million doses; the United States, 2.5 million; Japan 1.05 million; and the United Kingdom 415,000. [At Chongqing in June 2021](#), China pledged to donate more vaccines to Thailand. Foreign Minister Wang Yi also said that China would donate 100 million more doses of vaccines to Southeast Asian nations.

The Thai monarchy also intervened to distribute another China-made vaccine. Princess Chulabhorn, a sister of King Maha, signed a royal order to import Sinopharm for distribution until the government had enough supplies. The purchase was done by the Chulabhorn Royal Academy. But then accessing the vaccines required purchase notices paid by people, a matter that has impaired equal access to these.

BRI AND THAILAND 4.0

China, of course, was a big beneficiary of its own vaccine diplomacy. In Thailand, the fact that it was the quickest to extend a hand when Bangkok's prospects of getting vaccines were particularly dire certainly helped China gain more than a few brownie points. By then China was involved in many major projects in various sectors in Thailand, and several of them were attracting attention – and not in a good way. This was even as the projects were part of an ambitious development plan of the Thai government itself, although this paled in comparison with China's own grandiose development visions.

Before the Prayuth-led coup in 2014, some projects under the 'Thailand 4.0' national strategy, notably the Eastern Seaboard, were put on hold and subjected to [the check-and-balance system](#). After the coup, China assured support for Eastern Seaboard and other megaprojects, even though the Prayuth team had earlier opposed these.

In 2015, Beijing released its 10-year national strategic plan and industrial policy titled "Made in China 2025 (MIC 2015)" that seeks to transform China from a manufacturing giant to a

global leader in manufacturing high-quality and technology product. [One of the policy's aims](#) is to promote Chinese standards as international standards abroad, particularly in countries linked to the Belt and Road Initiative or BRI, which was launched in 2013 as China's infrastructure development strategy to promote connectivity between Asia, Africa, and Europe via land (Silk Road Economic Belt) and sea (Maritime Silk Road).

Thai leaders then and now have all agreed to participate in BRI. At the 9th BRICS Summit, the Thai government signed four memorandums of understanding with China covering the development of a high-speed railway connecting Bangkok and Nakhon Ratchasima (1st phase), strategic cooperation between Thailand and China (2017-2021), and Framework of 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

For Beijing, Thailand plays a crucial role in BRI due to its strategic location for the infrastructure network in one of the BRI's routes: the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC). China sees Thailand as a crucial ally in Southeast Asia and in countering geopolitical maneuvers between the United States with Japan and China itself.

For Bangkok, BRI will economically support Thailand and legitimize the coup in particular, and help the country achieve its 'Thailand 4.0' national strategy.

The military government adopted '[Thailand 4.0](#)' in 2016 as its economic policy to help Thailand escape from the so-called "[middle-income trap](#)" and to bridge the imbalance in development across the regions. The policy builds on [three project categories](#): digital infrastructure, skills formation, and target industries that are value-based and high-tech. (Economic strategies 1.0 to 3.0 had focused on agriculture, light industry, and heavy industry, respectively.)

Thailand 4.0 is the most prominent project on Bangkok's agenda to connect with other countries: Special Economic Zones with Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), a full package of railways, advancement of technology, and "smart city" projects. But the plan has met with criticism on account of internal market constraints, including limited technology and manpower capabilities, large numbers of small enterprises with limited innovation capabilities, and lack of continuity in policy implementation.

Thailand apparently saw in China support and rescue for its own ambitious development plans that had by then secured firm buy-in from the Thai elite and government. Thailand's participation in China's BRI in particular was viewed in Bangkok as an opportunity to achieve its grand policy's objectives, as [noted by then Minister of Commerce Apiradi Tantraporn](#).

On 9 December 2016 at the 5th meeting of China-Thailand Joint Commission on trade, investment, and economic cooperation, Thailand and China [signed a Memorandum of Understanding](#) for railway cooperation, cooperation arrangements of the technology for

electronic certificate of agricultural products, and other documents. The signing of MOU was presided by Somkid Jatusripitak, then the Prime Minister's deputy.

MEGAPROJECTS: EASTERN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (EEC)

In 2017, the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) under Special Economic Zones (SEZs) was launched on direction of the military government as part of the Thailand 4.0 policy under the 20-year national strategy. Its declared aim: Increase FDI and greater cooperation with China for Thailand 4.0.

The government set an investment goal of THB 1.5 trillion (US\$43 billion) over the first five years. Within the megaproject are two types of projects: five infrastructure projects and 12 target industries development project via a Public-Private Partnership model. The model, under the promotional privileges set by the Board of Investment (BOI), has allowed foreign investment to conduct business in the area easily.

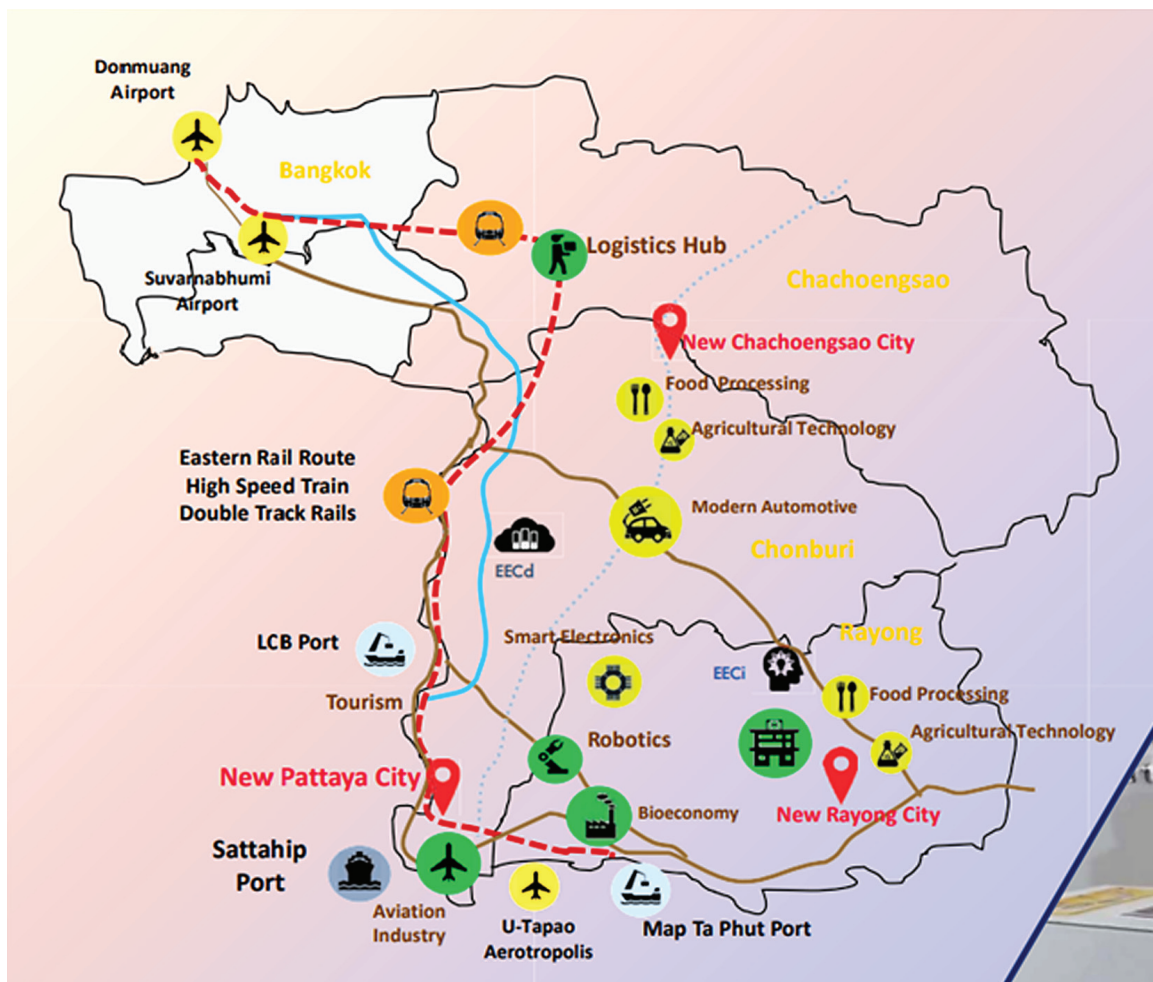
The former Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak had often cited in public the need to attract Chinese, Japanese, and South-Korean investors to Thailand. To achieve the investment goal, however, the military government seemingly aimed to [attract mostly Chinese investors](#) by collaborating with the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China Limited (ICBC), according to MOU signed on 26 May 2017.

Thailand and China are poised to both benefit from having the EEC as production bases and [connecting with the Greater Bay Area \(GBA\), thereby creating business links among these two](#). But Chinese investors in particular seemed to be more blessed, as [the EEC will offer Chinese investors opportunities to tap into the Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam \(CLMV\) market](#).

The EEC project covers three provinces: Rayong, Chonburi, and Chachoengsao. It is an extension of the Eastern Seaboard project, which was started in 1982 during the term of General Prem Tinnasulanond as Prime Minister and taken up again during the Thaksin administration. In September 2009, the Eastern Seaboard project was [suspended by the Administration court](#) on account of its impact on the environment and the wellbeing of local people. But the EEC project ignored lessons from the Eastern Seaboard project, which drew opposition for allowing foreigners to lease land for 99 years.

Many observers said that the EEC project would not have seen the light of day had it not been for the 2014 military coup,¹² which had triggered sanctions against the military government from the United States and the European Union. Although the sanctions were often described as rather soft, they were enough to cause Thailand's military prime minister to pivot toward China; he was soon seen meeting with Chinese government and business

executives. To accelerate the implementation of the EEC, the military government, [relying on Section 44 of the Interim Constitution](#), issued in 2016 and 2017 five National Council for Peace and Order orders with these numerical tags: 3/2559, 4/2559, 74/2559, 2/2560, 28/2560, and 47/2560. These orders [reduced legal restriction on the zoning](#), particularly industrial zoning and waste zoning, [took back government-owned land](#), [accelerated EIA/EHIA within one year](#), and [centralized decision making on development planning and land use within the area](#).



Source: *Eastern Economic Corridor: The Prime Gateway to Asia* published by the Eastern Economic Corridor Office of Thailand

The orders were used while the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) drafting the Eastern Special Development Zone Act B.E. 2561, which was enacted in 2018. The Act set up [special governing bodies](#), the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC), and the Board of Investment (BOI). BOI offers attractive and competitive promotional privileges such as tax incentives in SEZ and EEC areas.

Most institutions in charge of governance issues at the national and zone levels are public bodies, including the Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand (IEAT), a state enterprise under the Ministry of Industry that rents the land from the Ministry of Finance. This agency plays an important role in developing SEZs.

The Act also established the office that would be primarily responsible for EEC – Eastern Economic Office of Thailand – with the EEC committee. The committee has responsibilities to raise EEC-related obstacles to the Cabinet for amendment of laws, rules, regulations, by-laws, notifications or orders, or for the enactment of a new law,¹³ to formulate policies, land-use plan, development plan of infrastructure and public utilities, to prescribe criteria and procedures for the public-private partnership or private entities,¹⁴ and to approve, permit, and grant the right or concession.¹⁵

It is seen to be given discretionary power to oversee and decide on investment or concession-related issues, affects other laws, and exempts the EEC from 19 laws including the Town Planning Act, the Agricultural Land Reform Act allowing agricultural land to be utilized, and some provisions of the Enhancement and Conservation of National Environmental Quality Act neglecting the assessor requirement in the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).¹⁶

Furthermore, [the Board of Investments](#) offers promotional privileges to attract foreign investment, such as exemption of corporate income tax for up to 15 years, exemption of import duties, permission to own land for BOI-promoted projects, and land leasing up to 99 years.

The government planned to develop infrastructure and create promotional zones as illustrated in the table. The investment is in the form of public-private partnership (PPP).

Public-Private Partnership (PPP): Infrastructure Investments and Promotional Zones

Mega project	Thai entities		Chinese entities	Status
	Government agency	Private	Private	
High-speed Rail linking three airports: Don Muang - Suvarnaphumi - U Tapao (EECh - EEC High-speed rail link)	State Railway of Thailand (SRT)	Asia Era One Company Limited, a special-purpose company by the consortium of Charoen Pokphand Holding PLC, CH. Karnchang PLC, Bangkok Expressway and Metro PLC (BEM)	China Railway Construction Corporation Limited (CRCC)	Land expropriation and remedy process in Bangkok Zone
Dual-track railway connecting three Eastern ports	State Railway of Thailand (SRT)			

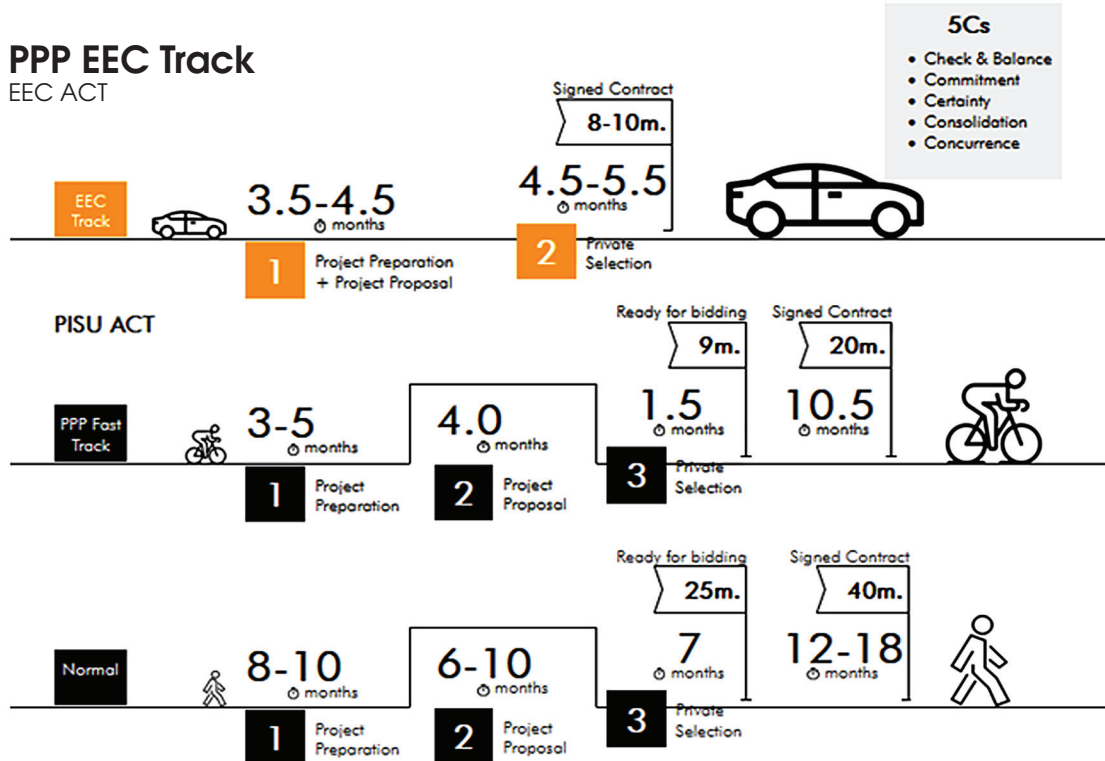
Public-Private Partnership (PPP): Infrastructure Investments and Promotional Zones

Mega project	Thai entities		Chinese entities	Status
	Government agency	Private	Private	
Map Ta Phut Industrial Port Phase 3	Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand (IEAT)	GPC consisted of Gulf MTP LNG Terminal Company Limited, a joint venture of Gulf Energy Development PLC (70%) and PTT Tank Terminal Co, Ltd (30%)	China Harbor Engineering (CHEC)	Civil work, compensation waiting for negotiation from Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand
Laem Chabang Seaport Phase 3	Port Authority of Thailand	Gulf MTP LNG Terminal Company Limited, a joint venture of Gulf Energy Development PLC (70%) and PTT Tank Terminal Co, Ltd (30%) CNNC	CHEC under GPC	Civil work, work progress is delayed due to the delay of compensation package to affected people given by Port Authority of Thailand
Sattahip Commercial Seaport	Unknown Thai-Chinese joint venture			
U-Tapao Airport and Eastern Airport City project (EECa – EEC Airport)	Royal Thai Navy	Bangkok Airways PLC, BTS Group Holdings PLC, Sino-Thai Engineering and Construction PLC	-	
Highways and Motorways linking EEC to SEZs	Ministry of Transport			
Digital Park: (EECd – EEC Digital) - 5G testbed - Internet of Things (IoTs) Building EEC e-Commerce	CAT Telecom PCL	- AIS	- Huawei Alibaba	
Without Promotional Zones and investments				
Zones/investment	Type/investment	Thai entities	Chinese entities	
Blue Tech City in Chachoengsao	Lithium Battery Future Waste Power Plant	Blue Tech Co.Ltd.	Unknown Chinese and Taiwan direct investments	

Without Promotional Zones and investments			
Zones/investment	Type/investment	Thai entities	Chinese entities
Petroleum	Petroleum Pipeline		Shinopec Group
Waste industry	Waste Power Plant	Global Power Synergy (GPSC) Co.Ltd. and Wha Utilities and Power Co.Ltd	Suez Asia Limited
101	Central Waste Treatment Plant		
105	Waste storing and landfill facility of waste		

Source: Chinese Investment in EEC Area in East of Thailand by Somnuck Jongmeewasin, Thailand's infrastructure market update and outlook 2021

The private sector has been a prominent player in the EEC, with a view that the return would be kept high enough and the government would maintain financial discipline.¹⁷ The government amended PPP EEC Track regulations to fast track the process involving these projects. Thus, instead of the usual 20 to 40 months (see Figure below), the process is expedited to run from only eight to 10 months.



Comparative timeline of PPP signed contract between normal, PPP Fast Track, according to PISU Act, and EEC Track, according to EEC Act

Source: <https://www.eeco.or.th/en/eec-ppp-track>

Currently, Thai and Chinese entities have completed signing on mega projects in the EEC. Thailand has incentivized the private sector to invest in infrastructure by giving out privileges, including the change of city and town planning and tax exemption, to facilitate the relocation of foreign investment. Chinese investors have expanded their industries to the EEC, which they use as production bases that are operated mainly by Chinese nationals while Thais are hired only for manual labor.¹⁸

With all the executives, managers, and production employees Chinese, knowledge transfer to Thais has little chance of happening. As it is, labor rights have been allegedly violated – long working hours, low wages, and zero welfare -- by Chinese investors. It has even been reported that when the cost of labor increases or there are demands for pay raises, these companies turn to hiring transnational labor from Myanmar and Cambodia instead. The law also does not adequately guarantee labor rights working for the companies as well, especially to form a union.¹⁹

Dr. Somnuek Jongmewasin, lecturer on environmental management at Silpakorn University International College and member of the Land, Natural Resources, and Environmental Commission under the House of Representatives, notes as well, “The industry tends to use collaborative robotic which results in unemployment issue. This is the social pain. There is no industry to foster grassroots economy. If the economy fosters the people, the development will be community-based business. This is the way to develop economy from the bottom up.”

The prevailing set-up, however, has even fostered a business clique among Chinese and Thai-Chinese investors. Chinese investors tend to work with their groups or with particular Thai-Chinese investors. Thus the partnership for instance between CRCC and Dhanin’s Charoen Pokphand Holding PLC. (CPH) for the high-speed railway project. These tie-ups allow the easier import of raw materials and lower the production cost. Thai investors therefore aim to jointly invest with or become just nominees for a Chinese company.

EEC critics also say that without adequate policies and human-centric approach to development, the negative impacts of ventures within these zones, along with other mega projects, have been multiplying. To date, they say, these include land grabbing, water conflict, degradation of ecosystem and environment, expansion of waste industry, and negative impacts on people’s livelihoods.

The enforcement of the city and town planning specifically for the EEC alone has turned agriculture and residential areas into an industrial zone. What has upset people more is that such planning usually lacks their participation and has no appeals process. Between 2013 and 2018 [land value went up five times](#) in Chachoengsao and Pattaya, particularly in Sriracha town, Chonburi province, on the east coast of the Gulf of Thailand, about 120 kms southeast of Bangkok. Tracts of land in these areas had been bought by many companies, including the CP group, which acquired least 20,000 rai in the EEC area, and the King Wai

Group, a Hong Kong company, which acquired about 2,000 Rai. (One rai is equivalent to about 1,600 square meters; 6.25 rai, one hectare).

At Na Khao Wang district, Chachoengsao, people do agriculture, especially rice growing, fishing, and aquaculture. But since the establishment of the Bluetech industrial estate there, people have been complaining of all kinds of problems. Among the ventures in the estate are car-battery manufacturing and waste industry, using Chinese technology. Residents there say they have not only been evicted from their land, their river is now also polluted. Farmers also say that they now have inadequate water supply for irrigation. There had been an MOU between farmers and the Royal Irrigation Department regarding water use, but farmers say that the water from the reservoirs is now being channeled first to the industrial estate.

The number of entities that sort, destroy, recycle, and reuse sewage and unused materials has increased due to the exemption of EIA, resulting in the rise of the Chinese waste industry. [Reportedly, there are at least 725 waste operations in east Thailand](#). In [That Thong district, Chonburi](#), residents have been protesting against the Ken United Company for having its waste factory in the residential area and green area, which is specifically for agriculture purposes. Unchecked, chemicals are emitted into the air and spill into waterways. Yet, people there say, officials have not evoked the 'polluter pays' principle; instead, they seem more interested in having more waste facilities, and especially Chinese ones, into the area.

Sometimes the projects need not even be complete before problems start cropping up. The Map Ta Phut Industrial Port Phase 3 and Laem Chabang Seaport Phase 3, also in Chonburi, are still under construction, but many fisherfolk there have already been forced to leave their homes and are unable to fish due to ecosystem degradation. At the very least, though, residents received some compensation. Says Professor Somnuek: "For Laem Chabang Seaport, local people have been compensated by Port Authority or Thailand and GPC held public hearing for two times which they decided to remodel the construction hereafter. It sets differences in Map Ta Phut."²⁰

In Laem Chabang, the compensation paid was THB 30,000 (US\$876) per person annually for six years. In contrast, in Map Ta Phut, the residents were to be paid a flat one-time THB 100,000 (US\$2,922). [In October 2022](#), the people of Map Ta Phut said the compensation was not fair and violated the terms of the compensation agreement.

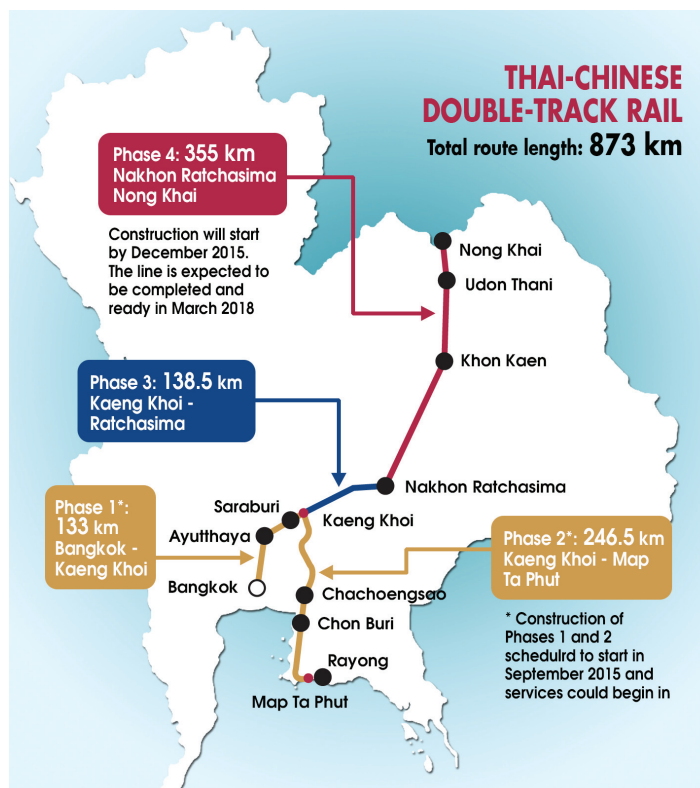
Some observers say that such problems would have been avoided had proponents ensured meaningful public participation in their projects. Observers say that this was lacking in one of the flagship mega-projects under PPP net cost -- the high-speed railway system linking three airports: Don Muang, Suvarnabhumi, and U-Tapao in Rayong, totaling 220 kms. PPP net cost is a type of PPP in which the private sector has ownership over the rev-

enue generated in the project for a certain period of time, and then is required to either pay a concession fee or share revenues with the public sector. For all its touted benefits for the public, the people in the project area are less than happy about it.

“The EIA should have stated the location of the train station, not just allowing the company to change,” says Professor Somnuek. “Furthermore, some local people do not even know about the project and the compensation is still in doubt. It raises a question on how they conducted the EIA. Local people will have their lands located along the railway expropriated as well, unlike in the construction of Airport Link Railway that did not expropriate land from the side of the railways.” Government’s avowed goal to uplift the economic status of the communities comes with a high cost that affected families will inevitably have to bear.

HIGH-SPEED RAILWAYS UNDER BRI

Even without objections from the public, Thai-China ventures can run aground. Take the Standard Gauge railway-project cooperation between Thailand and China that connect Nong Khai – Nakhon Ratchasima – Kaeng Khoi – Map Ta Phut Jetty, totaling 734 kms, and Kaeng Khoi – Bangkok, totaling 133 kms.



The project aims to accommodate the Thai Government’s main goals in line with the 20-Year National Strategy (2017-2036) by connecting Thailand to other countries in BRI, and to promote Thailand as a regional transport and logistic hub.

Such declared goals have yet to be fulfilled. The project has been delayed for almost a decade now due to protracted negotiations between Thailand and China, as well as the rising issues of internal procedures and land expropriation.

Source: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/advanced/909276/thai-chinese-rail-thai-sole-investor-to-speed-it-up>

The project has remained an aspiration for the Thai government since 1992. First, it was stalled due to the Asian Financial Crisis. In 2010, then Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva scrapped the project but failed to reach negotiation at a four-percent interest rate, partly due to the early dissolution of parliament. In 2013, Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra revived the project and drafted US\$2.2 million loan bills for a seven-year plan (2014 – 2020), instead of getting a Chinese loan. The project was stalled yet again after the Constitutional Court ruled the draft law to be unlawful, and because the military staged a coup in 2014.

On 19 December 2014, months after the coup, Thailand and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding on railway infrastructure development cooperation responding to the Strategic Framework for Thailand's Transportation Infrastructure Development (2015 – 2022). Under the MOU, China would be entitled to construct and develop the railway system, as well as jointly conduct a feasibility study with Thailand to begin construction work by 2016. The MOU also placed joint responsibility for the project on the Thai Ministry of Transport and the Chinese National Development and Reform Council.

Beijing and Bangkok had planned to jointly invest in the project. [Between 2015 and 2016, the two nations held at least 18 meetings to discuss the project, but failed to settle major concerns, thus causing delaying construction work.](#) Over the course of negotiations, [Bangkok's focal concerns](#) were the high interest rate that China has imposed but would not reduce, investment proportion between the two nations, and the speed and route of the railway.

[After two years of negotiations](#), the Thai government finally decided to solely invest in the high-speed railway project, but hire China to develop the route as well as provide technology. for the project. This decision was announced by Prime Minister Prayut at Chan-o-Cha at the first Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) summit in Sanya, Hainan province, China that was held from 22 to 23 March 2016.

The decision also included the alteration of the train speed from middle-speed to high-speed, or 250 kilometers per hour. On 24 August 2016, Thai Transport Minister Arkhom Term-pittayapaisith and the Deputy Head of the China's National Development and Reform Commission of China, Wang Xiaotao, signed the Cooperation Framework between China and Thailand to strengthen railway infrastructure development cooperation responding to [the Strategic Framework for Thailand's Transportation Infrastructure Development \(2015 – 2022\)](#). Because the project had been delayed, the military government issued the National Council for Peace and Order's decree [no.30/2017](#) on 16 June 2016 under the enforcement of Article 44, with an aim to speed up the construction of the high-speed railway in the first phase, from Bangkok to Nakhon Ratchasima. This was after Arkhom and Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak [asked the government to enforce Article 44 to override obstacles.](#)

The order instructed the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) to hire a Chinese state enterprise with experience in high-speed railway development and certified by the National Development and Reform Commission of China. The enterprise was entitled to oversee the design of the railway infrastructure, rail, and electrical system, serve as an advisor, and provide training for system-related project matters.

The order also exempted the project from the laws related to architecture and engineer license and procurement. It lacked international bidding; the State Railway of Thailand and China set the estimated contract price and competitive tender process.

In sum, the order raised serious concerns over the independence and accountability of the contractor, supervisor, architecture, and engineer of the Chinese company with shares held by Chinese provincial government.²¹ Still, on 20 December 2017, the first phase of the project began.

There has been only slight progress since. The construction has been stalled due to the problem with land expropriation, the COVID-19 pandemic, overlapping of Eastern high-speed railway as in 4-1 contract, and an ongoing lawsuit in some contracts, notably contract numbers 3-1, 4-1, and 4-5.

Contracts for the First Phase of the High-Speed Railway

Contract No.	Details	Contractor	Status
1-1	Klang Dong-Pang Asok	Department of Highways	Completed
2-1	Sikiou- KutChik	Civil Engineering PCL	Ongoing
3-1	Kheang Khoi-Klang Dong and Pang Asok-Ban Dai Mah	Pending	Issues on plan/ lawsuit pending
3-2	Muak Lek-Lam Takhong	NawaratPatanakarn PCL	Ongoing
3-3	Ban Dai Mah-Lam Ta Kong, including Pak Chong station	Thai Engineer and Industry Co., Ltd.	Ongoing
3-4	Lam Ta Kong-Sikhio, and KutChik-Khok Kruad	Italian-Thai Development	Ongoing
3-5	Khok Kruad-Nakhon Ratchasima	SPTK Joint Venture (Nabha Construction Co.Ltd, Sekartar SDN BHD and BINA Puri SDN BHD from Malaysia)	Ongoing
4-1	Bang Sue Grand Station-Don Mueang International Airport	Asia Era One Co., Ltd. (included in construction contract of 3 Airports project)	Issues on plan/ lawsuit pending

Contracts for the First Phase of the High-Speed Railway

Contract No.	Details	Contractor	Status
4-2	Don Mueang International Airport–Navanakhon	Sino-hydro Co., Ltd. SahakanWisawakorn Co., Ltd. Tipakorn Co., Ltd.	Completed
4-3	Navanakhon–Ban Pho	China State Construction Engineering Corporation Co., Ltd. NawaratPatanakarn PLC. A.S. Associate Engineering (1964) Co., Ltd.	Ongoing
4-4	Chiang Rak Noi depot	Italian Thai Development	Completed
4-5	Ban Pho–PhraKeaw, including Ayutthaya station		Issues on plan/ lawsuit pending
4-6	PhraKeaw–Saraburi	Unique Engineering and Construction PLC	Completed
4-7	Saraburi–Kheang Khoi, including Saraburi and Kheang Khoi station	Civil Engineering PCL	Ongoing

Track work, Electrical and Mechanical, System, and training (China)

The State Railway of Thailand signed an agreement with China Railway Design Corporation (CRDC) and China Railway International (CRIC) on 28 October 2020

Detailed Design (China)

The State Railway of Thailand signed an agreement with China Railway Design Corporation (CRDC) and China Railway International (CRIC) on 4 September 2017.

Construction supervision consultant services (China)

The State Railway of Thailand signed an agreement with China Railway Design Corporation (CRDC) and China Railway International (CRIC) on 4 September 2017.

Source: https://resolution.soc.go.th/PDF_UPLOAD/2564/P_405392_4.pdf

With the project mired in delays, the government exerted some effort to speed up the process, even as communities located along the project routes endured discomfort and displacement. On 23 March 2022, the Cabinet approved a bill to expropriate land in five provinces – Pathum Thani, Ayutthaya, Sraburi, and Nakhon Ratchasima – for [the first phase, which is expected to be completed by 2026](#).

In the construction scheme of the high-speed railway, the rail tracks have to be expanded to 40 meters on each side. The Friends of Homeless Group, an association of the affected families, said they expect to see the expropriation of land belonging to at least 3,899 households in 56 communities in the northeastern provinces where the railways will be constructed.²²

With assistance from the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI), a state agency, the group and other CSOs have been demanding the State Railway of Thailand modify the homes of the affected families; find a new residential area within five to seven kilometers, and adopt rent contracts for those who do not possess these, in order to compensate the affected people.²³

CSOS WIN: MEKONG RIVER ROCK-BLASTING ON HOLD

There is at least one major infrastructure project with Chinese interests that has been pushed back: the Mekong Navigation Improvement Project. Part of China's grand scheme to expand its trade navigation originating in Yunnan in China through Myanmar, Thailand, and Luang Prabang in Laos, the project covers a total distance of 886 kms. It aims to clear the waterways and smooth out the rapids, which impede the safe passage of ships in the Mekong River. The key work involved is the removal of major rapids and reefs by dynamiting and dredging the river channel to enable 150-, 300-, and 500-tonnage (DWT) vessels to pass through. The project reportedly aims to upgrade the ports along the navigation route, including Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong in Thailand's Chiang Rai province.

The project is part of the SEZs in Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong. In 2002, the Cabinet approved SEZs in Maesai, Chiang Saen, and Chiang Khong in Chiang Rai province, and Sadao in Songkla province. Chiang Saen was set to be a center of SEZs and connect China through Mekong River; Chiang Khong connects China through Route 3A (R3A) connecting Kunming, China to Laos and on to Thailand.

In 2013, during the term of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, the fourth Thai-Laos Friendship Bridge was opened. Its [construction was funded](#) by Thailand and China to connect with R3A (Kunming, China to Bangkok). For Chiang Saen, the navigation improvement in the Mekong River was undertaken for the SEZs.

Two decades earlier, the governments of China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand had conducted a [joint investigation of waterway transportation](#) on the Upper Mekong River to determine the navigation development costs, as well as which country would gain the least and which the most. It led to [the 20 April 2000 signing of The Quadripartite Agreement on Commercial Navigation on the Lancang-Mekong River](#) by China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, laying a legal basis of the upper Mekong international navigation. More than a year later, the four countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish a coordinating mechanism – the Joint Committee on Coordination of Commercial Navigation on the Lancang-Mekong River (JCCCN) – that is made up of representatives from Laos, Thailand, China, and Myanmar with MRCs as an observer. It also includes [Guidelines on the Maintenance and Improvement of the Navigability of the Lancang-Mekong River](#).

[On 29 January 2002](#), the Thai Cabinet under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra approved the draft Environmental Impact Assessment prepared by China on clearing of the Mekong River. China had long been sponsored several joint-survey teams for water transportation improvement.

But the government had not held a public consultation on the matter. Once Thais got wind of the planned blasting upstream from Khon Pi Luang, concerns were raised about possible impacts on the environment and the rights of people in the area, security, and the demarcation of the Thai-Laos border. Many also criticized the proponents' apparent lack of prudence. As a result, [the Cabinet delayed the project](#) until a detailed environmental and social impact assessment was made on 8 April 2002, or in less than three months.²⁴

The project did not make any progress though; eventually the Thai military government that took over in 2014 scrapped it. Then in [February 2016](#), the JCCCN gave conditional approval for the Development Plan of International Navigation on the Lancang-Mekong River 2015-2025, which includes implementation schemes for [Phases I and II of the project](#). By 27 December 2016, the plan gained approval from the Thai Cabinet, allowing the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) Second Harbor Consultants to carry out an initial survey and impact assessment.

The Chinese state-owned engineering company had won the bid to dredge the reef and blast rocks in the Mekong River for commercial shipping. Before the Cabinet approval of the development plan, [CCCC Second Harbor Consultants and the Marine Department presented the project details with the Rak Chiang Khong group](#).

The Chinese company hired TEAM Consulting Engineering and Management to collect material for the Environmental Impact Assessment and to conduct a public hearing in Thailand. CCCC Second Harbor Consultants was to be the first to review the EIA. [Niwat Roykaew, a chairman of Rak Chiang Khong group](#), voiced concern that since the assessment was sought by the Chinese company, this could favor China and put Thailand at a disadvantage.

Many civil-society organizations had strongly opposed the project from the beginning; they filed petitions with the Thai government and [Xi Jinping](#) expressing concerns in 2017. Recalls Kraithong Ngaonoi from the Living River Association: "During the public hearing, they avoided to invite affected local people. We, as CSOs, tried to participate in every hearings with journalists. When we asked the Consult company, they could not answer use but saying that they need to consult with the government. Also, most of the consultants are Chinese. That raised questions on transparency of the assessment."²⁵

Later, [the National Council for Peace and Order](#) invited the Rak Chiangkhong group to clear up matters, as well as to ask it not to use violent means to obstruct the Chinese group working in the area.

Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai raised concerns about the project during a bilateral meeting with Chinese State Councilor Wang Yi in the third Lancang-Mekong Cooperation ministerial meeting in Dali, China. China took more than a year before deciding to terminate the project, which Wang conveyed to Don at a meeting in [February 2019](#). [On 4 February 2020](#), the Thai Cabinet approved to terminate the project.

“Currently, the project is still quiet,” Kraithong says. “I am still uncertain with the future whether China plans to push it further or not, as they have pushed forward with the SEZs and high-speed railway. However, if we have an elected government, then the decision will be based on what the people say, unlike under a military government.”

He says that “the current mechanism is not adequate for people to have voices heard. We need Mekong river committee at the provincial level, for instance Chiang Rai should have one.”

CHINA’S SECURITY MODEL

Despite all the posturing of the present Thai government, there is no denying that the country has been under military rule for more than a decade now. This has had impact not only domestically, but also on Thailand’s relations with other countries.

Among the most important developments in Bangkok’s foreign relations is that after the 2014 coup, [Washington decided to cut spending](#) on military exercises and defense engagement activities in Thailand. Thailand then turned to strengthen its cooperation with China, although in large part this was also because of the Prayuth-led military government’s desire for political legitimacy. Thailand’s security law and grand Thailand 4.0 development strategy that required big financing made the pivot to China quick and easy.

In 2015, Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan visited Thailand and met with Prime Minister Prayuth and Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwan. At the meeting, China reaffirmed its commitment to supply weapons, hold joint military exercises, and invite Thai officials to observe China’s reform process as well as legal and security affairs.

[Thailand, for its part, expressed a need to exchange intelligence data, and thanked China for understanding its political situation.](#) The agreements gave the military government virtual free pass to make any deals -- even problematic arms agreements -- with China, despite public concerns about dwindling revenues to support the national budget.

[In 2015](#), security cooperation between Thailand and China intensified. First, China upgraded its attaché to Thailand to two-star general, its highest-ranked military attaché in the South-east Asia region. Second, Thailand agreed to buy three diesel-electric submarines, in what was called the biggest defense deal in its history. Third, Thai-China military exercises became more frequent. And fourth, officers and cadets of the Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) started to attend courses at military schools affiliated with the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Among these, the submarine purchase attracted the most criticism from the public, which questioned the quality of the Chinese vessels, as well as the way the procurement was done.

In 2014, the Commander in Chief of the Navy, Admiral Kraison Chansuwanit, proposed to buy two submarines for the defense ministry led by General Prawit Wongsuwan at a cost of THB 36 billion (about US\$1 billion). In 2015, a committee of high-ranked navy officers reviewed proposals from six countries: China, France, South Korea, Germany, Russia, and Sweden.

The decision came within just two weeks, surprisingly fast for a deal involving complex submarine technology: China won the bidding.

As laid out by Beijing, China would sell two submarines and give one more for free to Thailand. [In 2017](#), The military-led Cabinet also secretly approved and signed an agreement with China Shipbuilding & Offshore Int. Co. Ltd to re-engine the first submarine. [When asked why the purchase had not been made public beforehand](#), Bangkok said that not all issues approved by the Cabinet have to be conveyed to the press. The deal would require Thailand to gradually pay China over 11 years, with THB 13 billion to be paid between 2017 and 2021 for the first submarine, and the remaining THB 23 billion for second submarine to be paid on the 11th year.

MIMICKING CHINA: CONTENT, DATA CONTROL

But submarines are not the only Chinese products that the Thai government has been keen to import. It has also brought in [Chinese surveillance technology, tapping the controversial Chinese electronics company Huawei](#). Just recently, Thailand launched the Huawei 5G test bed, amid [the U.S. advisory to bar the Chinese telecoms](#) that are subject to Beijing's control or undue influence, posing risks of unauthorized access.

[Huawei has announced](#) its firm support for digital innovation and digital economy in the Asia-Pacific region and signed MOUs with several countries, including Thailand, for the Huawei ASEAN Academy, Smart Campus, Data Center, Digital Power, and Huawei Cloud. This has dovetailed with Bangkok's plans to scale up Thailand's digital economy and smart-

city capacities, as planned under the EEC project. [On 9 August 2022](#), the National Cyber Security Agency signed an MOU with Huawei to increase cybersecurity skills of Thai IT personnel through Huawei's E-Lab online learning platform, organizing competition projects, and Huawei training courses.

[Huawei pledged during the signing ceremony](#) to promote top cyber talent competition and key technological development, covering global trends such as 5G, cloud, mobile, and cybersecurity leadership skills, with the goal in engaging in cybersecurity. In August 2022, Thailand's National Cyber Security Agency awarded Huawei with the [Cybersecurity Excellence Award 2022](#).

The adoption of the technology nationwide is being undertaken with the support of big data assisted by Chinese technology companies. Apart from Huawei, there is Megvii, which has produced facial recognition technology for China. [In 2018](#), it appointed NVK as its [distributor](#) in Thailand and talked to commercial banks to deploy its facial recognition software. (NVK is also a [distributor for Hikvision](#) selling closed-circuit television or CCTV units.)

[HiKvision has demonstrated](#) its "Face+AI+Police" set-up to police departments in Thailand. Megvii and Hikvision are among the Chinese companies [blacklisted in the United States](#) over alleged human-rights violations against Muslim minorities in Xinjiang.

Thailand set up the committee of comprehensive integration of closed-circuit television and ordered the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society (MDES) to connect at least 360,000 security cameras nationwide. In March 2022, First Deputy Minister (General) Prawit Wongsuwan ordered MDES, Ministry of Interior, and the Royal Thai Police to install more CCTVs across the country and integrate AI technology in them, especially in the southern border provinces, where Muslims are the religious majority. [The government has approved least 75,476 security cameras in each province](#), but it [remains unclear](#) whether there has been AI integration in the security cameras. What is clear is that these tactics have increased the efficacy of the Thai authorities in monitoring, surveillance, and risk-notification systems.

In [June 2020](#), there were reports of 8,200 cameras installed in the southern border provinces, supervised by the National Security Council in Bangkok. Furthermore, [people in the area were being subjected](#) to biometric registration on SIM cards and DNA collection, which resulted in discrimination against the Muslims there.

In an interview, Chanatip Tatiyakaroonwong, a Chevening-Cambridge Trust Scholar who has done research on the politics of information technology and counter-insurgency in Thailand's southern border, observes: "The problem of this is transparency. The procurement is not made public due to national security, which they often cite. However, there is

still government's aspiration in identifying people in the southern border provinces as there have been news about integrating AI into security cameras."²⁶

All these are coming at a time when Thailand has launched and implemented cybersecurity-related laws and institutions that are alarmingly similar to what China has. Although Bangkok says that these initiatives have been rolled out to support the digital economy, they have attracted significant concern from CSOs, which believe that these are being used to abuse, harass, arrest, and stifle the rights of those perceived as critics of the Thai government.

Since 2014, the Thai military-led government has been ramping up its digital prowess, including developing e-government services. At the same time, however, it has been tightening its grip on Thai cyberspace through the [centralization of Internet space](#). Not surprisingly, the global rights monitor Freedom House has ranked Thailand's Internet as "not free."

The Internet space centralization in Thailand has been done intensively through legislation and institutions of the state, state-owned enterprises, or big communication companies. State surveillance and digital authoritarianism have developed in Thailand eerily by the patterns and processes of China.

Systematic control of the Internet in Thailand began when the Computer Crime Act came into effect on 18 July 2007, following the military-led coup in 2006. Soon after, the filing and prosecution of cases reportedly [rose during July 2007 to July 2010](#). During that period, there were 185 cases in relation to the Act and 117 court orders to block access to 74,686 URLs.

In 2016, the military-appointed National Legislative Assembly (NLA) amended the Act, which was later passed on 24 May 2017, supposedly to tackle complex Internet offences and protect national cybersecurity. But [civil-society organizations](#) argued that the new law would not solve the problem of strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) cases, and would only create more problems.

The act has since been used to prosecute those criticizing the monarchy or the government online; offenders could face up to five years imprisonment and fines for spreading supposedly false information and threatening national security.

According to the Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (TLHR), [at least 159 people were charged for exercising their right to freedom of expression between 18 July 2020 and 31 December 2022](#). The Act has been used jointly with Section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code (lèse-majesté law) that stipulates imprisonment ranging from three to 15 years. Furthermore, MDES [filed a closed-door petition in court against at least 4,024 URLs deemed critical to the monarchy between August and September 2020](#) -- in the mould of the vague and broad

China cybersecurity law of 2017, which allows state agencies broad powers to interview companies and individuals.

The NLA also passed the Cybersecurity Act in May 2019. The act aims to secure national security in cyberspace, covering both public and private-sector data, with the ultimate goal of transforming Thailand into a digital economy. But then it has put both public and private service providers in the under control of government entities. [It grants the National Cybersecurity Committee \(NCSC\)](#) the ability to classify information and telecommunications companies as Critical Information Structure (CII).²⁷ It also allows Thai authorities to compel service providers to comply with their orders in relation to national security. Its provisions are open to broad interpretation and grant the government, invoking national security concerns, power to seize data and electronic equipment without a court order,²⁸ as well as access personal information without oversight from the court or other agencies. For CSOs working on digital rights, this is the real function of the law: [discourage digital economy in Thailand](#).

Thailand already has many institutions to filter the Internet and which strictly monitor online content. Among these institutions are the Cyber Security Operation Center (CSOS), Anti-Fake News Center, and Monitoring Protest Situation Center under the Computer Crime Act. Under the purview of MDES, these institutions have been [criticized](#) as reinforcing censorship and autocratic directives. They have also been politically misused against those critical to the government and the Thai monarchy, with [the record of charges](#) against “fake news” being brought primarily against opposition politicians and civil-society members.

Thailand has been attempting to set up a “Single Gateway” to centralize the flow of information and Internet access. For many observers, this is an apparent signal that the Thai government intends to create its own Great Firewall, similarly to that of China. The government sees the needs of single gateway for the sake of the country’s defense, [said Prawit on 14 December 2016](#). The initiative had been proposed by the Ministry of Information, Communications, and Technology (MICT) with the Ministry of Justice and the Royal Thai Police in [June 2015](#), supposedly to control inappropriate websites and the flow of information from foreign countries on the Internet. It was heavily criticized by CSOs, after which talks about it petered off. In February 2022, MDES head [Chaiyawut Tanakamanusorn](#), mentioned it during a parliament meeting, but its status remains unclear to this day.

Thailand’s effort to replicate the Chinese model, though, has been made tangible as several MOUs have been signed between Thailand and China. [On 22 May 2022](#), during the meeting between the Vice Chairman of the National People’s Congress (NPC) standing committee Wang Chen and Thai first deputy speaker of the House of Representatives Suchart Tancharoen, China and Thailand publicly vowed to work together in legislatures, strengthen exchanges and mutual learning in rule of law, and advance the implementation of the Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative.

On 6 July 2022, Thai DES Minister Chaiwut hosted the signing of MOU on cybersecurity between the National Cyber Security Agency (NCSA) and the National Cyberspace Administration of the People's Republic of China (CAC), led by CAC director Zhuang Rongwen. The MOU was aimed at exchanging information, skills, and experience for improvement of digital economy.

During [the 5th China-Asean Information Harbour Forum in Nanning](#) on 19 September 2022, Chaiwut said that digital cooperation with China would lead to sustainable development of the two countries, and pledged cooperation with other ASEAN members and China to develop a good digital ecosystem that would create beneficial, sustainable e-commerce trade in the future.

DEMOCRATIZATION ISSUES: CHINA'S RESPONSE

On 21 February 2020, the Thai Constitutional Court ruled to dissolve the Future Forward Party (FFP), a political party rising in popularity. The court also banned members of the party's executive committee members, including FFP leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, from entering politics for 10 years.

The ruling ignited massive youth-led protest actions emerged calling for democracy in Thailand. The momentum of the movement would later lead to the Thai protesters forming the so-called 'Milk Tea Alliance' with like-minded youths in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The alliance began after pro-Chinese Communist Party netizens launched an online campaign against a Thai actor and his girlfriend who made a post criticizing the one-China policy. It prompted rapid response from netizens, in defense of the couple. The underlying issues of the response were territorial claims about Taiwan and Hong Kong and fears of encroaching authoritarianism and CCP influence in Asia. Later, pro-democracy netizens loosely coordinated to come together. This led to a meme war on Twitter between those who were pro-China and those who were pro-democracy.

The Milk Tea Alliance has since become a pan-Asian collaboration and solidarity network for democracy of the youth in the region. The movement has tackled a wide range of advocacies, including democratic reforms, capitalism, and putting a stop to the Mekong Dam.

Netiwit Chotiphathaisal, one of the founders of the Milk Tea Alliance from Thailand, recalls that the Alliance was formed "during the violent crackdown of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong" He says that the Alliance "has a clear concept about democracy" and that it "makes people understand" issues better.

With the emergence of the pro-democracy movement in Thailand and talks challenging the one-China policy, China did not stay silent. [On 10 October 2020](#), the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok, through its official Facebook page in Thailand, published a statement condemning Hong Kong protesters and Thai politicians supporting the separation of Hong Kong and China. [In response](#), the Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai reiterated Thai support for the One-China Policy.

Netiwit, meanwhile, founded with some of his friends the Sam Yan Press, which has published books critical of China, including about Xinjiang, where about a million Muslims, mostly Uyghurs, have been held in secret detention camps without due process since 2014. [On 26 October 2022](#), a Chinese businessman demanded Sam Yan's closure, offering Netiwit THB 2 million (US\$60,000) to do the deed. Netiwit didn't bite, but the gesture by the Chinese businessman has been seen by many as a new form of stifling and silencing foreign publishers who criticize China.

Democracy has found many believers among the children, the youth, and the people of Thailand. Several waves of protest actions between February 2020 and January 2023 attest to this. But the streets have started to quiet down in 2022 due to heavy repression, arrest, detention, and prosecution of those who have chosen to exercise their freedom of expression and assembly. Even the Milk Tea Alliance hasn't been heard from lately.

Yet Netiwit believes that the Milk Tea Alliance can be revived if people see the common issues that need to be tackled. One of them, he thinks, is the "Mekong Dam built by China."

"That," Netiwit says, "may have potential in bringing people to start the movement again."

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- 20 Interview on Professor SomnuckJongmeewasin on 2 September 2022
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- 22 Interview with Nuttawut Krompukdee, Friends of Homeless Group in KhonKaen, on 25 August 2022
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- 26 Interview with Chanatip Tatiyakaroonwong on 6 June 2022
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CHINA and FIJI

Debt diplomacy to the max





Fast Facts : FIJI

Official Name : Republic of the Fiji Islands

Capital City : [Suva](#) on the island of Viti Levu (pop. 167,000)

Government : Type: Parliamentary Democracy

Independence (from U.K.) : 10 October 1970

Constitution : July 1997 (suspended May 2000, reaffirmed March 2001)

Geography : Location: Oceania, island group in the South Pacific Ocean.

[Area](#) : 18,333 km²

Terrain : Mostly mountains of volcanic origin or varied, dense tropical forest.

People:

[Population](#) : 870,000 (in 2015)

[GNI per capita PPP](#) : \$6,282 (year)

Ethnic groups: Indigenous Fijian 54%, Indo-Fijian 40%.

Religion: Christian 52% (Methodist and Roman Catholic), Hindu 33%, Muslim 7%.

[Languages](#): English (official), Fijian, Hindi.

Literacy: 93%

Introduction

CHINA HAS had a [wide range](#) of strategic political, economic, cultural and diplomatic interests in the Pacific, with Fiji playing the role of a pivotal partner, given its status as the hub of the Pacific, and the base for most of the multilateral and regional organizations.

China is now the second largest donor in the Pacific, and the largest bilateral donor of Fiji.

Fiji is also relatively influential as the Pacific's most developed country, with the second largest economy, after Papua New Guinea. In addition, Fiji boasts of [sizable quantities of natural resources](#) and raw materials like timber, minerals, and fish, with potential for seabed mineral explorations in future, which is yet another attraction for China.

Given Fiji's political, economic and geostrategic clout in the region, China sees Fiji both as a major ally on its own right, and as a conduit to gain influence with the other countries in the region.

It's a strategy out of the playbooks of other nations. But unlike many of these, China adheres to a non-interference doctrine that allows it to continue dealing with a country even when it suddenly comes under a regime that is less than democratic. Having a rigid, one-party government also means that China can easily move resources whenever and wherever its leaders see fit, whether domestically or overseas. These have enabled China to come to the rescue of Fiji whenever yet another coup caused it to suffer sanctions from Western nations, including

its traditional political and economic allies Australia and New Zealand. And when countries around the world were busy scrambling to secure vaccines primarily for their own populations at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, China stood tall and offered Fiji and other nations vaccines and other medical equipment.

For Fiji's powers-that-be, therefore, China has been an all-weather friend -- so much so that they have accepted nearly all kinds of aid and loans from the Asian giant with little question.

The apparent open-arms policy of successive Fijian governments toward Beijing has also seemingly emboldened Chinese companies to flout Fijian laws, often to the detriment of the environment and local economies. Moreover, observers say that some Chinese officials assigned in Fiji have become so brazen in displaying their clout that they have gone after Beijing's perceived enemies in the island nation. According to one observer, when a Pacific island nation leader – a known harsh critic of Beijing – visited Fiji, he was followed around by people identified later as from the Chinese embassy.

China, however, has been careful not to flex its being a major world power in its dealings with Pacific island nations. Instead, it uses its developing-country status to portray its development aid scheme as a 'South-South' cooperation in providing assistance to other developing countries. In this regard, China is represented on regional organizations like the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), where Fiji is quite influential. As a [dialogue partner](#) in PIF since 2000, China can rely on Fiji's support in the organization, as well in the MSG, with which China has established close working relations. While MSG's headquarters are in Vanuatu, the PIF Secretariat is in Fiji.

One determinant of Fiji's importance to China is the trajectory and level of China's development aid to it.

According to a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement, Chinese development aid in Fiji has a broad spectrum, covering [more than 20 areas](#), including trade, investment, ocean affairs, environmental protection, disaster prevention and mitigation, poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, tourism, culture, and sports. These areas fall under the ambit of various agreements between [Fiji and the Chinese](#) state, such as foreign-aid projects, general foreign aid, technological cooperation, human-resources development and cooperation, emergency- humanitarian aid, debt relief, student scholarships, and so forth.

Moreover, Fiji receives funding not only from the Chinese central government, but also from Chinese local governments at various levels. [Aid methods](#) include non-reimbursable assistance, interest-free loans, and concessional loans (soft loans). Chinese aid to Fiji in the seven years to 2013 actually exceeded its traditional aid donor, Australia's contribution by more than US\$110 million.

Information from the U.S.-based AidData show that from 2000 to 2019, China had provided Fiji multibillion-dollars worth of some 160 assistance packages, most of them grants, but also official development aid, concessional loans, technical assistance, and training and scholarship projects. China has exerted its soft power in truly generous amounts for projects big and small across the communities and islands of Fiji.

The agreements cover every imaginable area and form -- goods, services, and projects for the economy, defense and security, civil service, health care, education, pandemic and

crisis response, among others, in Fiji.

Examples of these agreements include the provision of hydrographic and surveillance vessel to Fiji's Navy; computers for Fiji's Ministry of Defense; military equipment; "a non-weapon aid package"; purchase of medical equipment, medicine, relief goods, heavy-duty equipment, sewing machines, and fire trucks.; equipment for Fiji's Police Force and Fire Services; scholarship for hundreds of Fijian students and exchange programs for training of civil servants, security personnel, journalists, and other groups in China ; renovation and extension of Confucius Institutes; funds "to support Fijian presidency at UN climate change convention"; funds to support participation of Fiji national sports teams in various international sports leagues; Wushu and Tai Chi coaching programs; training of 100 Fiji government officials; funds for various infrastructure and civil works projects (i.e. Rice Revitalization Project, Stinson Parade Bridge and Vatuwaqa Bridge Reconstruction Project, Sigatoka Valley Road and Sawani-Serea Road Upgrade Project, Raiwai Public Rental Housing Project, Rural Road Upgrade Project, Nadarivatu Hydropower Project, Vaturu Hydropower Project, Naqali Bridge Project, Navuso Bridge Construction Project, Nukurua-Vatukarasa Road Upgrade Project, concessional loan for E-Government Project, pledges to cancel Government of Fiji's outstanding debt obligations set to mature); and funds "for unspecified purposes."

China's successful penetration of Fiji's national economy, government, and society, though, was not an overnight achievement, but founded on decades of consistent effort, beginning with low-level ties in the 1970s.

These ties gained greater impetus through higher levels of [development aid](#), driven by China's adoption of economic reforms in 1978. The same year, Fiji's founding prime minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, made the first official visit by a leader of the nation to China, followed by Chinese Vice Premier Chen Muhua's Fiji visit in March 1979. This tradition of reciprocal visits by the two countries' successive leaders has helped sustain and cement ties over the decades.

A major turning point in Fiji-China relations came in 1987 as a result of a military coup d'état that toppled the democratically elected government in Fiji. This resulted in Fiji's suspension from the Commonwealth and the imposition of international sanctions.

However, China, based on its doctrine of non-interference in other states' internal affairs, maintained ties with the coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka's regime. Fiji's subsequent rehabilitation from the coups and the restoration of democracy coincided with China's ongoing economic transformation and further diversification of its aid programme.

This saw Fiji become a major beneficiary of increasing levels of Chinese contracts and developmental support in infrastructure, public facilities, education, healthcare, and other

fields. Fiji-China ties achieved a milestone in May 2006 when Wen Jiabao became the first Chinese premier to visit the country. In an indicator of how pivotal Fiji was for China's Pacific-wide strategy, Wen used his Fiji visit to launch a new regional initiative: the China-Pacific Economic Development and Cooperation Forum, an umbrella platform for the promotion of relations between China, Fiji and the Pacific as a whole.

When Fiji's [fourth coup d'état in November 2006](#) led to another suspension of the country from the Commonwealth, as well as from PIFs, China just like before continued to maintain ties with the country via the coup leader, Commodore Voreqe 'Frank' Bainimarama.

As the rift between Fiji and its traditional partners Australia and New Zealand worsened, Bainimarama turned to China with his 'Look North Policy,' which seized the opportunity to deepen ties with the regional giant through further aid and diplomatic support. Bainimarama, who stepped down from his premier post in 2022, has remained grateful to China since and remains a trusted ally, expressing appreciation for China's support at every opportunity, and highlighting that when its traditional partners shunned Fiji and turned it into a pariah state, it was China that came to the rescue.

Further indication that Fiji-China ties were growing from strength to strength was the opening of the new chancery of the Chinese Embassy in May 2010, in the prime location of Queen Elizabeth Drive in Suva's foreshore area. The chief guest was none other than the President of Fiji, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, who warmly congratulated China at a reception attended by close to 200 VIP guests.

According to the Embassy media statement, Nailatikau recalled his personal contribution to the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Fiji in 1970s, and expressed "sincere appreciation to the Chinese Government" for its "confidence and faith in Fiji." The president also emphasized that "the new complex is a reflection of the growing, cordial relations and cooperation between China and Fiji, which will continue to grow to greater heights in the years ahead."

In a sign of Fiji's growing importance to China's strategic aspirations in the Pacific, Xi Jinping in November 2014 became the first Chinese president [to visit Fiji](#), with the trip culminating in five agreements with Fiji and its Pacific neighbors to facilitate increased economic and defense cooperation. The Fiji agreements included visa exemptions for Fijians traveling to China and the establishment of a Chinese cultural center. In his [welcoming remarks](#) that would be seen as a thinly veiled swipe at Australia and New Zealand criticism of his 2006 coup, Bainimarama noted that China had been "a true friend of Fiji" and had never interfered in the country's internal politics.

‘DEBT DIPLOMACY’

For China, decades of cultivating ties with Fiji and its vast investments in the country have paid off handsomely, both diplomatically and economically. Bilateral aid is China’s key soft-power instrument through which it has made major inroads in Fiji and in the Pacific region.

According to research by the Australian think tank Lowy Institute, by 2016 [China had become Fiji’s largest bilateral donor](#) through its vast, multifaceted development- assistance schemes. The quick turnaround times, relatively few conditions attached to the funding, and overall easier access to monies, has been especially attractive for Fiji and for other countries in the region desperate to develop their national infrastructure -- although the lack of checks and balances have resulted in allegations of corruption and “white elephant” projects.

There has been some concern expressed about China’s “debt diplomacy” in the region, especially the level indebtedness and the ability to repay. In [Fiji’s case](#), its Chinese debt stood at 10.6 percent of total government debt in 2018, and deemed not a concern by the Fiji government.

However, while comprehensive analysis of debt statistics has seen the “debt trap” scenario downplayed in the Pacific, economist Jonathan Pryke emphasizes that “[significant risks](#)” remain because of the acute vulnerability and size of island nations, and the potentially large strategic benefits to China for relatively minimal investments.

While China brings many benefits to Fiji and the region, the trend in some other countries indicates that there could be potential costs as well. Going forward, it is something for Fiji to carefully consider.

BIG STRIDES IN ECONOMY, BUSINESS

The China-Fiji economic relationship is underpinned by trade agreements, private- sector investments, and infrastructure development, which have steadily increased over the years through consistent efforts and initiatives, mostly on the part of China.

The outcome is partly reflected in foreign investment figures. According to the [2016-2017 Invest Fiji Annual Report](#), Chinese investors accounted for 44 percent of total investors, particularly in wholesale and retail, service, tourism, real estate and manufacturing, compared to eight percent of Australian investors, and nine percent New Zealand.

In terms of trade, in 2021 [Chinese exports to Fiji](#) totaled US\$397.4 million while [Fiji exports to China](#) totaled US\$46.2 million, mostly comprising woodchips, iron ore, mineral water, timber, and tuna.

According to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Fiji that was established in 2018, there are currently [around 30 Chinese companies](#) in the island nation, most of them construction firms.

The increase in trade and growing Chinese business operations in Fiji, both state enterprise and private, reflects the rewards reaped by China for its ceaseless efforts to proactively identify and exploit opportunities in the country, and to continue building on the momentum since the 1970s, by actively seeking ways to expand activities and operations in various sectors of the Fiji economy.

Even its Special Administrative Regions or SARs have joined in. In May 2019, the [Macau-Fiji Chamber of Commerce was launched](#) in Macau by Fiji's then Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport Faiyaz Siddiq Koya.

Building on the momentum, the Chinese Embassy announced in December 2020 China's [intention to further enhance cooperation with Fiji](#) through e-commerce, education, and personnel training.

According to Ambassador Qian Bo, China was willing to work closely with the Fijian government to continuously promote friendly relations and deepen bilateral cooperation to bring more benefits to the two countries and their citizens. The relationship continues to grow from strength to strength, with new initiatives launched on a regular basis. In 2022, for instance, the [China-Pacific Island Countries Poverty Reduction and Development Cooperation Centre](#), was unveiled in Fujian province.

Between 2006 and 2017, [China provided nearly US\\$1.5 billion in foreign aid](#) to the Pacific Islands region through a mixture of grants and loans, with Fiji a major beneficiary. By 2017, China was [set to overtake Australia as the largest donor to the Pacific](#) after pledging US\$4 billion.

Agriculture, tourism, and fisheries continue to be among the major areas targeted for development in Fiji. Fiji is among the Pacific Island countries where China has launched [multiple agricultural technical](#)-assistance projects to improve agricultural production capacity and food security. Chinese experts have built demonstration farms and promoted improved crop varieties in Fiji, besides giving other technical support, such as the establishment of a Juncao (called "happy grass from China" by Fijians) technical demonstration center in the island nation.

In 2019, the First China-Pacific Island Countries Agriculture Ministers Meeting was held in Fiji, which issued the *Nadi Declaration of China and Pacific Island Countries on Agricultural Development*, charting the course for practical agricultural cooperation. This was followed up in 2020 by the first China-Pacific Island Countries Forum on Fishery Cooperation and Development in Guangzhou, which Fiji attended. The forum produced the *Guangzhou Consensus of the First China-Pacific Island Countries Forum on Fishery Cooperation and Development*, aimed at deepening fisheries cooperation between the two sides.

One of the [more advanced projects](#) involves Juncao mushroom producers, with over 2,000 farmers having received some sort of training, and Fiji seen as having potential to become a major mushroom exporter to China.

China has certainly won friends among Fijian farmers with the Juncao grass, a [genetically modified](#) combination of 30 plants, developed in Fujian, south-eastern China. It has simplified mushroom farming in that there is no need to cut down trees to grow mushrooms on wood. Instead, one simply scatters seeds among the Juncao grass, which also prevents soil erosion.

Besides an important trading and development partner in its own right, Fiji is regarded as China's lynchpin in the region—in diplomatic, geopolitical and economic senses. China has signed and secured various bilateral agreements with Fiji, and multilateral agreements with Fiji and other Pacific island states covering trade, investments, tourism, fisheries, forestry, and resource extraction. Moreover, China is increasingly investing in green energy and climate-change initiatives, two issues on the top of Pacific Island countries' agenda, and over which they have [clashed with Australia](#), which had refused to act on emissions reduction. Ironically, though, China is by far the bigger polluter internationally.

POLLUTER FOR 'BLUE ECONOMY'?

Beijing's strategy to exploit divisions in the region and forge ties through multiple agreements are bearing fruit, with China now a permanent fixture in some major regional organizations. At the same time, Beijing organizes, finances, and hosts regular high-level trade symposiums in China, as well as in some Pacific Island countries, to secure and facilitate agreements.

One example is the *2017 China-Small Island States Ocean-related Ministerial RoundTable* with the theme "Blue Economy and Ecological Islands." Besides those from Fiji, senior representatives from Samoa, Vanuatu and Niue attended the meeting, culminating with the signing of the [Pingtan Declaration](#) to "safeguard our blue planet."

[Adopted by the Pacific Small Island Developing States](#) in the lead-up to the Rio+20 conference in 2012, the Blue Economy concept is regarded as a “highly influential” tool for elevating the concerns of Pacific island states on the global [sustainable development](#) agenda. It is supported by several major regional organizations: the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF),⁸ Pacific Islands Forum⁹ and its Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner (OPOC),¹⁰ the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP),¹¹ and Pacific Islands Parliaments Group (PIPG).¹²

Pacific island states feel strongly about the Blue Economy, which links the region’s social and economic development, besides protection of the environment. China seeks to win Pacific friends by ingratiating itself into the project through the Pingtan Declaration and other relevant agreements. It is seen as a deliberate move by China, given Pacific Island countries’ discontent with Australia’s plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions only by 43 percent, which island countries deem “[far from adequate](#).”

Some observers are skeptical about China’s support for the Blue Pacific, however, given China’s poor environmental record, and its reputation as a major polluter. Sustainable fisheries is integral to the Blue Pacific Project, and the heavy Chinese presence in Fiji and Pacific fisheries -- and the reportedly ruthless harvesting methods employed by Chinese ships -- has caused some concern in the region.

But any reservations about Chinese fishing methods have not gotten in the way of increased ties with China, which continues to come up with ways and means to boost its environmental credentials in Fiji and the rest of the region. For example, the [China-Pacific Islands Investment](#) promotion symposium seeks to leverage China’s strong interest in emerging areas like renewable energy and green energy, along with e-commerce and agri-technology. It is an example of how economic and business activities are increasingly embedded with environmental elements like clean energy, to make proposals more appealing and palatable. China, to its credit, is making substantial investments in clean energy, and appears willing to share the technology in the region.

On 25 August 2022, Griffith University, Australia, hosted a talk, “Climate conversations and disconnected discourses: An examination of how Chinese engagement on climate change aligns with Pacific priorities.” The talk aimed to address the gap with regards to engagement on climate change between China and Pacific Island countries.

Fiji was a key player in the 2021 China-Pacific Islands Symposium held virtually, and used as a platform for the “Fiji-China Virtual Trade Expo.” The Expo aimed to allow Chinese consumers and businesses to learn more about Fiji and engage virtually with key and emerging markets. It showcased over 60 Fijian companies in the health, cosmetics, and food & beverages sector, among others.

At the second Pacific Islands Investment Promotional event in Shenzhen in May 2021, the remarks of the keynote speaker, Fiji's ambassador to China, Manasa Tagicakibau, underscored how much Fiji valued its partnership with China, the economic ground China has covered in Fiji and the Pacific, and China's growing status as an economic partner in the region -- all of it achieved within a relatively short period of time.

Tagicakibau's comments also reflect appreciation for Fiji's infrastructure development that China had made possible and the impact that this is having on Fiji and its people. He said, "China, like many other countries, has been our friend and bilateral partner for many years and many of our Pacific Island countries have partnered with them to provide sources of revenue through trade and investment opportunities. We have challenges due to our geographical location, the supply-side capacity challenge, the distance, the technological gap. Despite this, we are optimistic that in solidarity and unity, with more engagements and cooperation and with further exchanges for a win-win outcome and mutual benefits. We are confident that together we can overcome these challenges and build a better and a more prosperous future for both our countries."

BRI ON A ROLL IN FIJI

In 2017, China introduced its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the world. At the inaugural forum was Fijian Prime Minister Bainimarama. Fiji signed up to the initiative in 2018, along with a separate agreement on economic cooperation and aid. Bainimarama has strongly endorsed the BRI, stating that its broad prospect will bring important opportunities for [the Fiji-China](#) cooperation.

Likewise, in his statement on June 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared that his country [stands ready to strengthen strategic alignment](#) with Fiji through the BRI to support Fiji's economic and social development. Xi indicated that the BRI was central to cooperation in trade and investment, and in the development of infrastructure, transportation, and communications.

China has indeed helped boost the national infrastructure in parts of Fiji in fairly significant ways, endearing it to successive Fijian governments and ordinary Fijian citizens, especially those who benefited directly from the development.

In the five years to 2018, [277 Chinese investment projects](#) worth a total of US\$2.36 billion were successfully implemented in Fiji, as highlighted by Premila Kumar, Fiji's Minister for Industry, Trade and Tourism, at the China (Guangzhou)-Fiji Business Dinner at the Grand Pacific Hotel, in Fiji's capital, Suva. These included the construction of the first of 10 new jetties, in which the Chinese Government invested more than US\$30 million, and in 2014, the China-assisted Navua Hospital, which today serves over 30,000 local residents.

A good number of [Chinese firms and SOEs](#) (State-Owned Enterprises) now have large-scale operations in Fiji, concentrated in construction, mining, logging, and fishing. A major Chinese state-owned firm, China Railway Corporation, was involved in infrastructure development for the state, but is now carrying out private-sector projects as well. China Railway First Group (Fiji) Ltd [built the highway in Nadi](#) town, the hub of the country's tourism industry, as well as the city's largest building, the Nalagi Hotel, with Chinese development funds. One of its current projects is the construction of the FJD 65-million Fijian Holdings Limited (FHL) commercial building in Suva.

LYNCHPIN OF GEOSTRATEGIC GOALS

Some critics have asked whether China's lending and development assistance is a vehicle [to get Chinese state-owned and private enterprises](#) into the South Pacific, as part of China's broader geostrategic ambitions to get a firmer foothold in the region. Economist [Pryke opined](#) that the last two decades, China's Pacific expansion has occurred at a much faster rate than what could be considered a natural reflection of China's growing economic and geopolitical clout, raising major questions about China's ambition in the South Pacific, and what risks this creates for countries in the region.

Besides the broader geopolitical questions, there is some disquiet about how at least some Chinese companies are now competing in commercial activities across the board, and how, in some cases, they could be taking work away from local firms and workers. But there have been no studies in this regard, and as a result, no proper understanding of the depth of the problem, let alone effectively dealing with the situation. As [Pryke observed](#), China's own investment statistics showed Chinese construction activity in the region was US\$958 million in 2017, almost six times greater than its foreign-aid activities. This indicates a strong return on foreign-aid investments in the form of construction contracts.

Some companies behind the multiple infrastructure projects have become well established in Fiji and continue to secure major state projects, funded not just by the Chinese and Fiji governments, but by international multilateral organizations as well. These include the [US\\$150-million Nadarivatu hydro-electric scheme](#) commissioned in 2012, which was undertaken by Sinohydro Corporation Ltd, PowerChina's hydropower subsidiary company. The project was partially bankrolled by the state-owned [China Development Bank](#) through a US\$70-million concessional loan, subject to the project being awarded to a Chinese firm.

The dam was designed generate 100 million units of electricity annually to power homes in villages, farming areas, and cities. Some of the villages never had electricity previously, hence their gratitude to the project partners, the governments of China and Fiji. The dam was touted to save Fiji up to US\$24 million in the importation of diesel fuel.

PowerChina has since established itself in Fiji and in April 2019, [signed two contracts worth US\\$266 million](#) with the Fiji government for the Rewa River Water Supply Scheme to improve access to water in the greater Suva. Speaking at the signing of the Asian Development Bank co-financed project, then Prime Minister Bainimarama stated that approximately 300,000 Fijians stood to benefit from the scheme.

MULTIPLE MINING CONCERNS

Several mining companies are active in Fiji, the two major ones being the Nawailevu Bauxite Mining Project (Fiji), owned by Xinfu Aurum Explorations and the Vatukoula Gold Mine (Fiji), majority owned by Zhongrun Resources Investment Corporation. They are part of China's [US\\$2-billion investment](#) in Pacific mineral exploration in the past two decades, or what is sometimes referred to as China's [resource diplomacy](#).

The Fiji-based Chinese companies have opened new operations and revived mining in some areas, creating government revenue and much-needed employment. Some of them, however, stand accused of serious environmental breaches, labor-rights violations, and creating conflicts in the community. This is even though all Chinese companies are bound by China's Guidelines for Social Responsibility in Outbound Mining Investments, which take into account internationally recognized codes.

In Fiji, the companies need to comply with the national Employment Relations Act and Environment Management Act as well. But the regulations are flouted, and in 2015, a village chief from northern Fiji went as far as to [accuse the Fiji government](#) of pushing companies to mine in the country with little regard for the environmental impacts on people's land. Adi Filomena Tagivetaua, from the province of Bua, stated that the landowners were "blinded by cash payouts."

Tagivetaua raised the alarm about the Chinese company [Aurum Exploration Limited, which hit the regional news](#) for allegedly carting away hundreds of tons of soil during bauxite mining operations in Nawailevu, Bua. Besides the company workers using "crude extraction processes" to produce almost one million tons of bauxite, villagers said, they were carting soil onto boats destined for China. Following a petition signed 226 members of the public, there was an investigation by a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Natural Resources. The committee's report discounted that soil, along with bauxite, was shipped to China – based on the company's advice. It appears that the committee took the company's word over that of the landowners.

The committee did [report that the landowners](#) were not involved in contract negotiations, which "totally eliminated them" from participating meaningfully in the business process. It noted that landowners are always vulnerable to exploitation by opportunistic consultants

and advisors. The committee cast doubt on validity of the Environmental Impact Assessment report. It pointed out that mining areas were so bare that wind erosion was continuously dusting extensive swathes of the surrounding areas. In addition, the Lekutu/Dreketi Bay fishing grounds and been affected by pollution from mining.

These findings indicate that while mining may be profitable for the company and for the government, the returns to the landowners are questionable if their environs and food security are threatened. The sidelining of landowners in negotiations is also highly questionable, as are the financial returns to them. Yet, despite the adverse environmental findings, there is no record of any action taken against the company. To the contrary, it had reportedly commenced mining at two other sites in Fiji, despite Tagivetaua stating that the Nawailevu Mining Project should never be repeated in any part of the country.

Bauxite mining in Fiji remains a concern given that there are still an [estimated 20 million](#) tons of the mineral in Vanua Levu. Without the proper procedures, it is reasonable to assume that the mistakes in the Nawailevu Mining Project can be repeated elsewhere. This means that not only are the landowners at the risk of losing out financially, but they could face major damage to their environment and threats to food security.

The Nawailevu Mining Project is not an isolated case. In Sigatoka, central Fiji, [another Chinese company](#) involved in mining dark mineral sand was reported to be attempting to take over an island off the coastal town. The issue has split the landowning community and caused conflicts between a group that wanted the investment and another group that didn't. Because the island is a key entry point to the Sigatoka River, there were concerns about the environmental impacts of further mining, dredging, and climate change that were said to be already depleting fish stocks. A 15 July 2022 *Sydney Morning Herald* report said, "The company's tactics are more reflective of some sharper edges of China's diplomacy in the region: large ambitions and big wallets are often accompanied by demands that deals be settled quickly. The approach can split communities and Pacific leaders."

CHINESE FLEETS ON FIJI SEAS

The concerns about mining, however, pale in comparison to concerns about fisheries, which is a far bigger industry. China has a major stake in fishing in Fiji, so much so that in 2001, reports about a [hundred-strong Chinese fishing fleet](#) setting up base in Fiji caused panic in New Zealand and in other neighboring countries.

New Zealand diplomats, concerned that the Chinese government would use Fiji as a new base for catching highly prized migratory fish species, demanded answers from Suva and Beijing. Such concerns are not entirely misplaced. According to the [Guardian's Pacific Plunder series](#), China's Pacific fishing fleet has grown by 500 percent since 2012 and has

been taking huge quantities of tuna. In 2019, the Pacific region exported 530,000 metric tons of seafood products, with Fiji as the second largest exporter (US\$182 million), behind Papua New Guinea (US\$1.2 billion). China imported US\$100 million worth of seafood from the Pacific, behind Thailand, the Philippines, and Japan.

According to the [Guardian report](#), China, having grossly overfished its own regional waters, is now taking tons upon tons of tuna from the Pacific. A survey of boats in the Pacific in 2016 found that Chinese-flagged vessels far outstripped those of any other country, with 290 industrial licensed vessels, more than a quarter of the total. Fiji and the other island countries' inability to adequately patrol and police their territorial waters compound the situation.

A [January 2021 series](#) by the U.S.-based [Brookings Institute](#) meanwhile said that illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing pose a major risk to the industry, and Chinese fishing vessels have been implicated in the practice. The report states that China boasts of the world's largest fishing fleet, which it uses to devastating effect to meet its population's huge demand for protein. China also provides generous subsidies, which has incentivized the rapid proliferation of large, capable, 'distant water' vessels that can harvest staggering amounts of catch in a single voyage, often by dragging the ocean bottom without regard to fish type, age, or quantity limits. When working together in fleets, said Brookings Institute, these vessels "are rapacious."

Various other reports over the years have [accused Beijing](#) of purchasing political silence in the South Pacific over fisheries, and of engendering corruption in the sector. In January 2021, [two Chinese fishing vessels based in Fiji](#) were seized by authorities in Vanuatu waters, raising questions about whether Fiji was a base gain for easy access to other countries territorial waters for illegal fishing activities.

FORAYS IN TOURISM

Another major sector of Fiji's economy in which China is making inroads is tourism. Fiji, like other tourism-destination countries, is courting China as potentially lucrative market in the coming years. In 2015, journalists from some of China's premier news outlets visited Fiji on a promotional trip. [Fiji, along with Palau](#), is the major destination in the Pacific, accounting for 80 percent of some 143,000 Chinese tourists to the region in 2017.

In 2018, Fiji received a total of [49,721 visitors from China](#), which reflected a visitor- arrival growth over a five-year period of 17.1 percent. There has been a steady increase in Chinese-tourist numbers. With the World Bank forecasting that Chinese visitors to the Pacific to grow at 20 percent per year to 965,000 by 2040, China has taken steps to lay the groundwork for the potential influx. In 2019, Beijing teamed up with the South Pacific Tourism

Organisation (SPTO) to launch the China-Pacific Tourism Year in Samoa, and [signed](#) the China-Pacific Tourism Development Initiative for 2020–2024.

The SPTO has been helping member states, including Fiji, to be '[China-ready](#)' through events like the 2019 China-Pacific Tourism Year, and the [China Pacific Tourism Development Initiative for 2020–2024](#). In 2020, China [pledged US\\$100,000](#) to the SPTO to help the Pacific tourism-driven countries affected by the pandemic.

Some [observers, however, interpret](#) China's membership of SPTO as a soft-power strategy to promote people-to-people links. They see the creation of an '[approved destination status](#)' (ADS) as the principal means by which China has been able to turn tourism into a diplomatic tool. According to an [Australian Strategic Policy Institute paper](#), the SPTO is the only forum through which China engages with the Pacific Islands directly as a participating member of a regional intergovernmental agency. Not only is China a formal member (outdoing Australia and New Zealand, which aren't members), it also sits on the regional organization's governing board.

There have been concerns about certain tourism investment projects. One case that the [Fijian authorities were able to prosecute](#) recently involved Freesoul Real Estate Development, for environment damage. Freesoul dug a channel through mangroves and a coral reef for access to a multimillion-dollar resort and casino development on an island. In April 2022, Freesoul was fined FJD 1 million by the High Court in Suva.

COERCION BY CARROTS AND STICKS

Considering their present trajectory, Fiji-Chinese ties and contacts look set to increase. But while the Fiji government is adamant about the benefits of the partnership, there are persistent concerns about the influence and impact of the world's most populous country -- and second largest economy -- on a small Pacific Island country. The more China becomes embedded in Fijian state and society, economically, politically, socially, the more the concerns, especially given the trend observed in some other countries and regions.

There have been nervous glances particularly at neighboring Solomon Islands, where Manasseh Sogavare's government switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, signed a controversial security pact with China, and secured a US\$66-million Chinese loan for the construction of telecom towers -- all in the span of less than four years, 2019 to 2022. In August 2022, an ABC News Australia 'Four Corners' television report, '[Pacific Capture: How Chinese money is buying the Solomons](#),' revealed documents claiming to show Chinese Government payments to Sogavare and his supporters. Head of Transparency Solomon Islands Ruth Liloqula described the alleged payments as "corruption," and further claimed that "[China is keeping this government together](#). We all assume that China

is remotely controlling the government and Solomon Islands affairs.”

The release of the ‘Four Corners’ report coincided with Sogavare’s crackdown on the state-owned Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC). Sogavare would later also [threaten to ban foreign journalists](#) over the report by ABC Australia. These, plus his decision to postpone the national elections from April 2023 to after the 2023 Pacific Games that the Solomons would be hosting, raised further anxieties about illiberal trends in the country, and subsequent impact in the region.

As of now, the situation in Fiji is not regarded as serious as that in the Solomon Islands -- although Fiji has had a punitive Media Industry Development Act in place since 2010, long before Sogavare’s crackdown on his country’s state broadcaster. And there was some disquiet in Fiji about Chinese Embassy officials’ aggressive behavior during Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s joint media conference with Bainimarama in Suva in June 2022, as part of his [South Pacific tour](#). The officials’ attempt to stop local journalists from questioning Wang during a joint media conference with Bainimarama was much criticized and widely reported. A [subsequent article](#) in the Asia and the Pacific Society blog highlighted how the Pacific media are increasingly under pressure from foreign elements, with some Pacific governments apparently cooperating with foreign delegations to stop their national media from asking legitimate questions.

Indeed, even as Fiji ramps up contacts with China, [some analysts have noted Beijing’s use of loans, infrastructure projects, and other economic measures as foreign-policy tools](#). As observed by a commentator, the set of economic instruments employed by China not only includes carrots but sticks, with China punishing countries that question or criticize it, using measures such as restricting trade, encouraging popular boycotts, and cutting off tourism.

Fiji’s bigger neighbor Australia is a good example of being on the receiving end of such coercive tactics, after years spent developing trade ties with China. It faced China’s wrath after Canberra’s criticism of Beijing blocking investigations into the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic. [China targeted several Australian industries](#) with economic sanctions, with Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian stating, “We will not allow any country to reap benefits from doing business with China while groundlessly accusing and smearing China and undermining China’s core interests based on ideology.”

ONE, AND ONLY ONE, CHINA

Fiji is less invested in Chinese trade than Australia is, with a comparatively benign attitude toward China. It rarely, if ever, challenges China on any issue. But Australia’s experience still stands as a reminder of the price of crossing China, and it serves as a cautionary tale

about over-reliance on China, whether its aid or trade, both of which often come with strings attached.

For instance, one strong condition of Chinese support to Fiji is strict adherence to the 'One-China' policy. This not only means Fiji reducing ties with Taiwan and facing a potential drop in the level of Taiwanese development support, but the possibility of Chinese sanctions for any breach of the one-China policy, real or perceived.

Fiji's efforts to strengthen its ties with China is certainly leading to a further weakening of Taiwan's position in the country. In May 2017, the Fiji government closed its trade and tourism office in Taipei and downgraded Taiwan to a trade office in Suva. Fiji did not issue any statement against China for its aggressive military exercises in the proximity of Taiwan's territory in the wake of U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit in August 2022.

Recently, there have been widely reported cases of increased intimidation and harassment of Taiwanese officials by Chinese Embassy officials in Fiji, without any reprimand from the host government. In a widely covered [incident on 8 October](#), Chinese officials tried to gatecrash the Taiwan National Day celebration at the Grand Pacific Hotel in Suva. In the fracas, a Taiwanese diplomat was assaulted and had to seek medical treatment.

This was followed by another incident on 9 August 2022 when a Chinese embassy spokesperson in Fiji [warned](#) that Taiwanese reliance on the United States to gain independence was doomed to failure. The statement was in response to *The Fiji Times* opinion piece on 6 August 2022, by Joseph Chow of the Taipei Trade Office in Fiji, in relation to the Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.

Labeling the opinion piece "extremely erroneous and provocative," the Chinese Embassy official added, "China will absolutely not tolerate any Taiwan independence moves that aim to separate the country under any name or by any means." Yet there was no Fiji government reaction to this rather aggressive, undiplomatic statement from the Chinese Embassy. It underscored Taiwan's weakening position in Fiji.

These developments support assertions that one of the greatest returns to China from its investment in the Pacific island countries is denying Taiwan the diplomatic space that it is trying to create, to strengthen its claims to being a viable, independent, sovereign nation.

POLITICAL INTERVENTIONS

As articulated in a 2019 Australian Strategic Policy Institute [research paper](#), the lion's share of Chinese public diplomacy activities in the Pacific Island states has been concentrated

on promoting elite-to-elite relationships. This is evident in Fiji, where China courts and establishes ties with people in leadership positions with decision-making power, especially in politics, business, and in the state security forces. At events hosted by the Chinese embassy, the president, prime minister, cabinet members, members of parliament, leading businessmen and businesswomen, and the top brass of Fiji's security forces are usual attendees.

Once the contacts are established, China spends considerable time and resources in maintaining the ties, and using the leaders to facilitate agreements and projects. They act as virtual ambassadors to promote China's image, both at home and on the international stage. The number of visits by Fijian leaders and senior officials to China is one indicator of these elite-to-elite relationships that China has cultivated. For example, between 2007 and 2020, Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama (in office since 2007) made seven visits to China; Fiji's foreign affairs ministers made nine visits in that same period. Such visits are usually accorded high status, with the visiting leaders accorded a red-carpet welcome, and in the case of the prime minister, complete with a national guard of honor.

In his July 2015 visit to China, Bainimarama met with and was warmly welcomed by President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People. Xi highlighted the strategic partnership that emerged after his Fiji visit the previous year and used words like "mutual respect" and "common development" to emphasize the commonalities between China and Fiji.

Having close ties with the leaders of countries it has diplomatic relations with helps China facilitate and implement projects and agreements at a faster pace. The Fijian prime minister himself announces or launches most of the major schemes between China and Fiji. Because of Fiji's status as the hub of the Pacific, he is roped in to announce China's multilateral projects in the region.

Having national leaders at the forefront of meetings and exchanges also ensures strong media coverage in both Fiji and China, and in other regional countries. The Chinese president's historic Fiji visit in 2014 received lavish coverage in both Fiji and China. The Chinese state media [reported that](#) as the first Chinese head of state to visit Fiji, Xi Jinping received two welcomes: first when he arrived at the airport, and then a traditional one. The message being conveyed to the Chinese people was that Xi was treated with esteem in foreign countries.

Important Fijian leaders are similarly feted in their visits to China. As articulated in a 2019 Australian Strategic Policy Institute paper, treating Island leaders [with all the courtesies and](#) ceremony bestowed on those of larger powers is both tactical and strategic. As a technique, it has had a winning effect not just on the leaders, but also, through national pride, on their publics at home, all the while reinforcing "China's solidarity with anti-colonial values."

Apart from the political elite, leaders of Fiji's military forces also visit China to strengthen people-to-people ties at that level. On [his visit to China](#) in May 2018, Fiji's police commissioner Sitiveni Qiliho stopped over at the Yunnan Police College to explore training and cooperation in various areas, including narcotics control. During his visit, Qiliho, accompanied by 20 fellow officers, was accorded a special guard of honor.

Shortly after his visit, Qiliho announced several initiatives to strengthen ties with China's security forces. Two navy officers received four-year Chinese Government scholarship to study in China, while China's Public Security police supervisor was appointed Chinese police liaison officer based in Fiji. The appointment followed a virtual meeting between Qiliho and the Chinese ambassador.

Furthermore, a Fiji Police Force statement announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with China's Ministry of Public Security to facilitate training for Fijian police officers at leading Chinese police training institutions, while police officers from China were deployed to Fiji on attachment programs. In his remarks, the Fiji-based Chinese Police Supervisor Lu Lingzhen described relations between the Fiji Police Force and China's Ministry of Public Security as "brotherly" and pledged to do his utmost to take bilateral relations "to a new level."

SECURING SECURITY, DEFENSE TIES

Beijing's engagement with Fiji and the Pacific was initially motivated by economic imperatives and cultural friendship. But the priorities have clearly changed and expanded with China's rise as a superpower, challenging the United States and its allies for military dominance. This means that the Pacific is not only useful as a source of raw materials, but also important geo-strategically. Clearly, China's efforts to forge and deepen political and military ties with Fiji and the rest of the Pacific community is no coincidence, but closely tied to China's global ambitions as a power in its own right.

Between 26 May and 4 June 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited eight Pacific Island nations with diplomatic ties to Beijing, with two draft documents for region-wide cooperation on his agenda. The agreements covering trade, security, police, and data-communications cooperation were to herald a supposed shift in Beijing's focus from bilateral to multilateral basis in dealing with 10 Pacific island countries.

Copies of the draft documents – the "China Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision" and "China Pacific Island Countries Five-Year Action Plan on Common Development (2022-2026)" – leaked ahead of the foreign ministers' meeting and prompted [a pushback from the President of the Federated States of Micronesia \(FSM\), David Panuelo](#).

In a letter to 21 Pacific Island leaders, Panuelo wrote that FSM would argue the “pre-determined joint communique” should be rejected, because he fears it “could spark a new “Cold War” between China and the West.”

In the end, Foreign minister Wang [failed to secure a comprehensive](#) agreement with the 10 countries in China’s sights. But he did manage to sign a number of bilateral agreements.

A leaked version of the agreements published by the AAP showed that China aimed to train Pacific police officers, team up on “traditional and non-traditional security,” and expand law enforcement cooperation. China also wanted to jointly develop a marine plan for fisheries and increase cooperation on running the region’s Internet networks, besides setting up cultural Confucius Institutes and classrooms. The paper mentions as well the possibility of setting up a free-trade area with the Pacific nations.

Some observers attribute what they see as increasingly bold, assertive -- even aggressive -- Chinese tendencies in the Pacific region in Beijing’s growing economic and military ties with countries such as Fiji, whose leaders appear simply eager to maintain close and direct relations with China.

SOFT-POWER SHOWCASE

China’s cultural footprint in Fiji continues to take root more firmly by the year. This is evident in the increase in Chinese migrants, and the establishment of institutions like the Confucius Center, the Fiji-China Friendship Association, and the China Cultural Center. China portrays these initiatives as part of efforts to build people-to-people ties and strengthen friendships, but some critics regard it as a soft-power strategy aligned to bolster Chinese presence and influence in the region.

Perhaps it is notable that the [proposal to establish](#) a Chinese cultural center was nestled in five agreements to boost economic and strategic ties with Fiji, which Xi Jinping had brought with him during his first visit to Fiji in 2014. The agreement included the “provision of goods to address climate change” and visa exemptions for Fijians traveling to China. Chinese visitors to Fiji do not need a visa and they can stay in the country for up to four months. This is more than what Fiji has accorded citizens of Grenada (30 days), Haiti (three months), and Indonesia (30 days). Pacific Island countries Tonga and Vanuatu allow 30 days visa-free stay, while Samoa allows 60 days.

While up to date, reliable figures are hard to come by, the apparent increase in Chinese migration in Fiji is manifest in the visible increase in Chinese-owned businesses in Fijian towns, cities, and residential areas – from large commercial enterprises to smaller retail shops, cafes and restaurants, massage parlors, and corner stores. Chinese-owned farms

have also become prominent in the Fijian countryside, and have become a valuable source of agricultural produce in markets and supermarkets.

On the negative side, concerns have been expressed about the influx of Chinese sex workers, and associated ills such as human trafficking and organized crime. In August 2017, 77 Chinese nationals deported from Fiji by uniformed Chinese police [were reported](#) to be sex workers allegedly involved in an online gambling fraud ring. The deportees were mainly young women allegedly brought to the island nation to service the increasingly large number of Chinese males working in Fiji.

The increase in Fiji's Chinese residents has coincided with the setting up of the [Confucius Institute at the University of the South Pacific](#) (USP) Laucala Campus in Suva in 2012. Since then, it has expanded with a "Teaching Point" opened at USP's Lautoka Campus in the western part of the country in 2014, and in the following year, Confucius Classrooms at the Emalus Campus in Vanuatu, and the Cook Islands Campus.

The Institute is jointly headed by a local director, Dr. Akanisi Kedrayate, and his Chinese counterpart Dr. Hui Yang. In 2022 there were six other Chinese staff listed on the Institute's website.

According to its [website](#), the Institute offers courses on Chinese language and culture to both Chinese and non-Chinese learners. It also organizes cultural activities for students and the public such as Dragon Boat Festival Celebration, Mid-Autumn Festival or Moon Festival Celebration, Chinese Photography Exhibition, Chinese calligraphy and painting competition and exhibition, and the Chinese New Year (Spring Festival). Since its inception, the Institute has graduated more than 4,000 students and hosted more than 100 cultural activities.

In May 2022, the Institute released its [first Strategic Plan 2022-2026](#), setting the "framework for each section's critical strategic issues and priorities within the overarching themes aligned to USP Strategic Plan: Shaping Pacific Future:2022-2024." According to a [statement](#) by the Institute, "the USP-CI team are (sic) committed to working hard to fulfil the vision and mission of this Strategic Plan."

Some observers, though, see the Confucius Institutes as a '[Trojan horse](#)' in the academia. These, they say, are meant to advance China's economic and diplomatic interests, under the guise of culture and language learning. But there appear to be no such concerns at USP. The university's deputy vice chancellor for education, Jito Vanualailai, [has said that he would like to see China expanding its investments at USP](#) beyond language teaching, especially in USP's work in relation to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

In Vanualailai's view, China is a world leader in renewable energy, particularly in the building of solar panels, which USP wants to promote in the region. Another area that he apparently regards China's help as crucial is in developing hybrid sailing vessels for inter-island travel in the Pacific. Said Vanualailai: "It is one area where we need big help because transport between islands is very expensive now (with its dependency on fossil fuels)."

Two other centers of note – the [Fiji-China Friendship Association established in 2012](#) and the China Cultural Center – were inaugurated in Suva in December 2015, as supposed symbols of the growth of Fiji's Chinese residents and the spread of their culture and language in the country. Fiji's China Cultural Center is the first of its kind in the Pacific region.

The Fiji-China Friendship Center is part of the [Pacific-China friendship Association](#) with 16 member-countries, including Australia and New Zealand. At the opening ceremony in Suva, then Chinese Ambassador Huang Yong hailed the association as a "new channel" in China-Fiji relations for people from all walks of life. Fiji's Social Welfare, Women, and Poverty Alleviation Minister, Jiko Luveni, welcomed it as another "milestone achievement" in the bilateral relations with China.

But some wary critics think the Pacific-China Friendship Association is a vehicle to promote the BRI. They regard it as [China's main point of contact](#) for rolling out the project in the region, noting that all of Beijing's Pacific island diplomatic partners have signed BRI agreements, with some having already embarked on such projects.

Then again, it's not just critics but also Chinese diplomats themselves who see a connection between China's cultural initiatives and the BRI. At a function to mark the fifth anniversary of the China Cultural Center, Chinese Ambassador to Fiji Qian Bo [told Xinhua News](#) that both China and Fiji can take "advantage of the Belt and Road Initiative to deepen our cultural exchange, which is part of the people-to-people exchange."

In recent years, Fiji has seen an increased number of art and performance groups from China holding shows, exhibitions, film screening, teaching, and training activities. Cultural exchanges were further enhanced with the Fiji Museum joining the International Alliance of Museums of the Silk Road in February 2021, becoming the first Alliance member in Oceania.

The cultural initiatives include university scholarships and fellowships in various subjects, exchange programs and friendship tours covering academics, doctors, teachers, journalists, media managers, diplomats, and public officials.

In 2021 alone, [China awarded 18 Fijian students](#) scholarships in PhD programs, four in Master's programs, and 11 in Bachelor's programs in fields ranging from agricultural technology, radiology, pediatrics, architecture, finance, power engineering, and various others.

(As a special area of interest, journalism and communication scholarships are discussed in more detail later in this report.) And while compared to rivals Australia and New Zealand, China's sporting ties with Fiji is not as strong, it is making noticeable efforts to address the gap. In 2015, China and Fiji signed the *Memorandum of Understanding on Sports Cooperation*.

COURTSHIP OF MEDIA

Another major part of China's soft-power strategy in Fiji and the rest of the Pacific would be the media. As detailed by Dr Denghua Zhang in an Australia National University (ANU) research paper, they are growing in importance. According to Zhang, China is using both its own media [outlets and engaging with the national media in Pacific](#) countries to "tell the China story."

In Fiji, China's Central Television's English international channel (CCTV-9) has established operations in Fiji. In September 2010, China's biggest state news agency, Xinhua, opened its first Pacific branch in the capital Suva, with a resident journalist from China. Xinhua also recruits local stringers.

In addition, Fiji boasts of a Mandarin-language newspaper, the *Fiji Daily*, which has links with Xinhua and other Chinese media. The *Fiji Daily* was established by a Chinese national who is a Fiji resident. Fiji's second daily national newspaper, the *Fiji Sun*, known for close links with China, provides its journalists scholarships to study at Chinese universities. The *Fiji Sun* has dedicated pages for news from Chinese-media outlets.

The momentum in the media sector reflects Chinese President Xi's 2018 national conference on publicity and ideological work, whereby he [stressed](#) that China would step up external efforts to "tell Chinese stories well" and to "make the voice of China heard." This very sentiment was echoed by the Chinese ambassador to Fiji, Qian Bo, in March 2018, when he [encouraged](#) *Fiji Daily* to play its role in "telling the China story well" and contribute to China-Fiji relations.

Subsequently, the Chinese Embassy in Fiji actively uses local media for publicity.

Zhang's research found that between August 2016 and September 2020, Chinese ambassadors to Fiji, FSM, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu published a total of 92 articles in the mainstream newspapers of these countries, with all the articles labeled as authored by the Chinese ambassador or provided by the Chinese embassy.

The research found that more than a quarter of these articles were about Chinese foreign policy or aid. Their second most common focus was Chinese aid to Pacific Island coun-

tries to combat COVID-19. Zhang considers these findings as evidence that Beijing has prioritized media outreach in the Pacific to build a positive image of its handling of the pandemic.

Besides taking the initiative on news coverage to boost its international image, China has been sponsoring visits by Pacific journalists to the mainland for training or exchange, and helping improve Pacific media facilities. Fijian journalists have been awarded scholarships in successive years; in March 2019, China even [funded](#) the construction of the press gallery in the Fiji parliament.

In recent years, the Chinese-scholarship recipients have been mostly from the favored newspaper, the *Fiji Sun*. Deputy [Managing Editor News Fonua Talei](#) was awarded a two-year scholarship to study for a Master in International Relations at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing. It followed her successful participation at China's year-long Asia and Pacific Press Center Journalist Training Program, which included courses at the prominent Renmin University, covering topics like the BRI, and an attachment at China Global Television Network.

Fiji Sun Managing Editor Digital Rosi Doviverata was the first Pacific Island journalist to be awarded the Dongfang fellowship run by *China Daily* – China's biggest English-language newspaper – in conjunction with leading universities in Shanghai and Beijing.

Another *Fiji Sun* journalist, senior business reporter Lusiana Tuimaisala, was the first Pacific Islander awarded a scholarship for one year with the China, Asia and Pacific Press Center Journalist Training Program.

In July 2021, two other *Fiji Sun* editors were awarded [scholarships](#) to do their master's at internationally rated Chinese universities. Managing Editor Business Maria Vula was accepted into the Master in Global Business Journalism Program at Tsinghua University, one of China's most prestigious institutes, while Deputy Managing Editor for Production Selita Bolanavaniua won a place at Beijing Language and Culture University. This is a top-ranking university with political science as one of its leading programs.

On occasion, though, critics have condemned the sometimes hostile Chinese attitude toward local journalists, including belligerent behavior at media conferences, and presented these as proof of the true nature of China's mindset on media independence. There was, for example, the instance of journalists [covering the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's Fiji visit](#) in May 2022 being blocked from filming or accessing the event. Fiji journalist Lice Movono, who has written for the *Guardian* and was covering the event, said, "From the very beginning, there was a lot of secrecy, no transparency, no access given."

Movono detailed more of what transpired to her colleagues, one of whom [wrote it up](#):

“There were multiple attempts by Chinese officials to limit journalists’ ability to cover the event. Media who had been granted permission to cover the visit – including her (Movono) – had their media passes revoked without explanation, and that she and her camera operator were ordered by police to leave the lobby of the Grand Pacific Hotel in Suva, where they were set to film the beginning of the meeting between Wang and prime minister Bainimarama.”

Movono claimed that Wang and Bainimarama’s joint media conference appeared to be managed by Chinese officials, with the press passes issued and the media briefing run by the visiting government officials. It was widely reported that Chinese officials informed the Fiji national press that no questions would be allowed. A journalist who defied the order and called out questions was ordered to leave the room before fellow journalists stepped in to defend him.

Events in Fiji and the Pacific would seem lend some weight to various studies and reports about the Chinese Communist Party’s agenda [to shape media content around the world](#). These include a study by Sarah Cook, research director for China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan at Freedom House. Her report, [China’s global media footprint: Democratic Responses to expanding authoritarian influences](#), asserts that China is “leveraging propaganda, disinformation, censorship, and influence over key nodes in the information flow,” and that these efforts go beyond “telling China’s story.” In fact, says Cook in the report, their “sharper edge often undermines democratic norms, erodes national sovereignty, weakens the financial sustainability of independent media, and violates local laws.”

At least two journalism professors in the Pacific later expressed concern about the behavior of Chinese officials at the Bainimarama and Wang Yi media conference in Suva.

University of the South Pacific journalism professor Shailendra Singh, in an [Asia and the Pacific blog](#), noted how some Pacific governments seemed to be cooperating with foreign delegations to stop their national media from asking legitimate questions. Singh stated that the Chinese officials’ determined efforts indicated that they came well prepared and organized to thwart Fiji’s national media.

The clash, according to Singh, exposed the apparent ability of Chinese officials to influence, dominate, and even give instructions to local officials, raising questions about China’s impact on the region’s democratic and media institutions.

Likewise, Peter Greste, director for the Alliance of Journalists’ Freedom and a professor of journalism at Macquarie University, [expressed concern](#) about how countries across the Pacific region have been adopting some of China’s more authoritarian tendencies to control the flow of information.

VACCINE DIPLOMACY

To hear some China critics tell it, Beijing actually has employed a team of Trojan horses in its forays in Fiji and the rest of the Pacific. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China faced accusations of [using the global health crisis](#) as an opportunity to increase its engagement in the region, and taking measures to ensure that the efforts received media coverage in both traditional and social media outlets.

Fiji, which had one of the [highest per capita average rates of new COVID-19 cases](#) in the world at the height of the pandemic in June 2021, declined the use of Chinese-manufactured vaccines. Nevertheless, it benefited from US\$1.9 million in cash and medical supplies from China that it shared with other Pacific island countries. This was in addition to other direct Chinese support in the form of face masks, surgical gloves, protective suits, test kits, and infrared thermometers.

In March 2020, Chinese medical experts held video conferences with Fijian counterparts, sharing details of China's experience in containing, diagnosing, and treating the pandemic.

To project the closeness between Chinese and Fijian leaders, Bainimarama received a personal [call from President Xi Jinping](#) at the height of the pandemic, when China faced public anger across the world. According to the Chinese state-media reports, Xi assured Bainimarama that China would continue providing Fiji with vaccines and other support, including the setting up of a China-Pacific Island Countries reserve of emergency supplies. In addition, China would [implement the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative](#) to put off debt repayment to assist post-pandemic economic recovery. The Chinese state media reported that Xi emphasized that since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, China and Fiji had worked together through thick and thin, and that their friendship had continued to deepen.

Fiji was chosen to co-host the second China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting in May 2022, where an "emergency supplies reserve" for major public health incidents and natural disasters was unveiled. Fiji was also among Pacific Island countries that benefited from the [Jack Ma Foundation](#)—a philanthropic organization in China—that [donated](#) 50,000 KN95 facial masks and 20,000 protective masks through the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19, established by PIFs. Furthermore, Fiji stood to gain from a [US\\$100,000 grant to the South Pacific Tourism Organization \(SPTO\)](#), to help the Pacific's tourism-driven countries affected by the epidemic.

Many of these activities were covered in mainstream and social media channels, including [Chinese Embassy articles](#) in a Fiji newspaper showcasing China's achievements in COVID-19 control at home, and the support given to Fiji to contain the pandemic. The article,

republished by the Embassy, appeared in the *Fiji Sun*, a known pro-China newspaper. Several *Fiji Sun* staff have received Chinese Government scholarships to study in the mainland in recent years, and one article by a Fijian student based in Wuhan [applauded China's efforts in controlling the virus](#). The student stated that he would rather stay in Wuhan than return to Fiji.

Such sentiments were useful for the Chinese government to provide a good impression to the Fiji public at a time when China was being attacked for its alleged silence on the origins of the virus, delayed notice to the international community about the seriousness of the situation, and human-rights abuses in its efforts to contain the virus at home.

Way Forward

Opportunities and Challenges



BY MULTIPLE mode and manner, *The China Gambit* unfolds largely unchecked in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Fiji. This has given rise to real, urgent concerns that deserve further and sustained inquiry and action by all stakeholders, and national and global democracy advocates.

The first hurdle: It is a difficult story to track and tell.

It is a layered maze of mostly opaque transactions that China sought and secured, in partnership with domestic political and business associates.

It is a bundle of contracts, projects, and interventions across multiple policy fronts: politics, the economy, trade, security, defense, foreign policy, culture, the media, and indeed, the state of governance and democracy in the four countries.

The second hurdle: It is a story that needs an attentive, committed audience, a real community of advocates – or more than just a scattered band of occasional critics.

By practice and program, many civil-society organizations do advocacy and civic mobilization pegged on specific issues; often, they focus on the most acute, loud, and controversial.

Quite a few do research, reporting, and critique of procurement contracts, aid, trade, loans, foreign affairs, culture, the media, and all other connected policy concerns that might be considered benign or “silent emergencies” but make up *The China Gambit*.

The third hurdle: Good information, data, official documents, and relevant literature about what and how the gambit unfolds are scant, kept secret, not accessible, and hard to obtain.

By all accounts, this problem has hindered the rise in awareness among even the most dedicated policy critics and civic-space stakeholders about what China and its domestic co-players have done, are doing, and plan to do still.

The fourth hurdle: It is a story that needs to be unpacked and popularized by specific pegs for specific audience groups.

Translating parts of these reports in the national languages could be an option. Repurposing long-form reports in shorter, more visual form appropriate to online and social media platforms is another. Conducting more face-to-face discussions about the findings of these reports with affected sectors and communities is yet a third.

DEEP-DIVE SESSIONS

These are among the suggestions that select stakeholders raised at four separate deep-dive sessions that Asia Democracy Network held as pre-launch activities for this project. Pre- and post-discussion surveys were administered at the sessions that were held for stakeholders in the Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Fiji.

Only nine of 22 participants – or just 40 percent -- at the four deep-dive sessions have so far inquired into China-related projects and activities, notably infrastructure and digital media projects, or for academic research and occasional blogs.

At least 12 or slightly half the 22 participants said they had only little to some awareness of China's influence-peddling activities in the four countries; the balance declared significant to full awareness of the same.

Except for one person, all the participants expressed significant to full interest in working on or engaging activities to explore China's role in their nations.

These were the responses obtained in a pre-discussion survey with select stakeholders from civil-society, academe, and the professions at the ADN deep-dive sessions. But after the major findings of the reports were discussed, the post-discussion survey responses largely turned for the better.

Nearly all the stakeholders answered in the affirmative when asked if the discussions helped to improve their awareness of China's interventions in their nations.

Too, nearly all affirmed that they or their organizations have interest and capacity to engage in or launch activities pertaining to China's role in their nations.

One participant, however, cited a need to consult with his organization -- "enhance our capacity first but we are ready to contribute." Another said that "we need further capacity building."

Some of those who expressed willingness to move the reports forward to advocacy level gave these responses:

- Yes, we already denounce government's malpractices and human rights violation, no matter the government;
- We will take some key takeaways from the report to be part of our external scanning for campaign work;
- CCP influence toward refugee, political activists in Thailand;
- Yes, we work with community-based colleagues affected by the (Thailand) ERC and SEZ projects;
- Yes, Because we are the ones who suffer the most from the policy interventions carried out by the CCP;
- Yes, but we need more resources for advocacy;
- Yes, this is my line of research;
- Maybe a little since it is quite a complex issue;
- It depends on the issue focus. And it will be mainly within the context of doing local (Philippine) policy advocacy and community engagement, with some regional linkages;
- It is better to also have a zoom-in on LGBT rights or LGBTs;
- Yes, from economic policy standpoint; and
- Yes. We can continue the dialogue with our member-parties regarding the influence of CCP in their political party management and agenda, if any.

At the close of the deep-dive sessions, in their own words, the stakeholders submitted these comments:

- "Love it & waiting for the full report;
- "Some highlight of the issues which severe affects;
- "Let's run more discussions;
- "Context Indonesia;
- "Information that is more in-depth and easily understood by the public is needed;
- "CSOs need capacity building on identifying areas of resistance;
- "Good to make the presentation simpler for public to appreciate;
- "Good to include private business sector – very different perspective;
- "Framing and strengthening the narrative to have a better and more systematic advocacy;
- "Great first step in exploring more on the 'influence' of CCP. Congrats to the team!;
- "We need to frame the conversations into even simpler forms of advocacy/conversation; and
- "Conduct more sector-based conversation."

NOTES FROM THE SESSIONS

There were at least three things that surfaced in all the sessions.

One was the concern that the research seems to be hinged on a “bad China” premise and that the ethnic Chinese communities in the subject countries would be put in a negative light.

Another was an apparent divide that existed in all the countries, albeit in varying depths, which put those who are pro-China on one side and those who aren’t (and are branded, rightly or wrongly, as pro-West) on the other.

The third was the observation that the local media have not been doing -- or have been unable to do -- their job properly.

It should be noted, however, that most, if not all, the participants had not really read the reports, which means the ‘bad China’ worry was not based on how they saw the content of these. An academic who was not present at the Philippine session but had read the country report before sharing his thoughts via email did not have the same concern.

The most engaged discussions occurred during the Philippine session, although the topics taken up were not as locally focused as the others. All four sessions, however, yielded interesting insights, with some unique to particular countries and others applicable to all, and even beyond the region. In at least three sessions, too, there was interest in learning how to break down the issues raised by the reports and conveying these down to the grassroots.

THAILAND

The main takeaway from the Bangkok session was that current Thai-Chinese relations are having a profound effect on how Thailand treats rights advocates and refugees from China. One participant cited the case of Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong who had been invited to speak at an event but was not allowed to enter Thailand by the Prayut government. This was at the height of Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement. The participant also said that Thailand has sent back Chinese refugees to their home country, a move that she said was meant as an accommodation to Beijing. In addition, there are at least 45 Uyghurs who are currently stuck at an immigration center in Thailand because the Thai government has not acted on processing their papers. Some 65 Christian Chinese, including 32 children, seem to be fighting deportation as well.

Concern for Beijing’s possible reaction has even affected Thailand’s stance on certain international issues. According to the participants, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was forced

to water down a statement on Ukraine. One participant also pointed out that those who are seen as going against China are painted by the junta as being “pro-U.S.”

On the business front, one particular Chinese-Thai tycoon was mentioned as being a major player in projects that have Chinese involvement. This tycoon is a major figure in the report. The participants conceded that Thai businessmen do need China as it is Thailand’s biggest market, and that “without China, they cannot expand.” But there seems to be growing concern on the apparently increasing Chinese presence in certain places such as Chiang Mai, where Chinese families are said to be taking over a lot of real estate. In Chiang Rai universities, there are now said to be many Chinese students.

The participants did not seem as bothered with the content-sharing agreement that some Thai media outfits have with Chinese state-owned media, with some saying that it was “not all black and white.” Still, they agreed that it was good to raise the issue for discussion. They also said that normally, people cannot really see the connections between China and aspects of Thai society, including how the government and its officials behave and respond to issues. They agreed as well that accountability and transparency are currently lacking. All these indicate the need for a better and freer press.

INDONESIA

In Jakarta, there was a common concern that Indonesia was coming under “bad governance,” with its leaders tending to have activities with countries “that don’t have good governance.” And while the participants said that Indonesians are not really that aware of the China ties of major government projects, they said that those keen to bring up issues concerning these are often hounded by fears of triggering racial riots reminiscent of what happened at the end of the Soeharto regime; as a result, they censor themselves. Apparently, too, there is now little middle ground left as state actors promptly accuse those seen as “anti-China” for one reason or another as “pro-U.S.” (One comment was that the next election will be a proxy war between the United States and China.)

This has left rights advocates unable to speak up or respond properly to issues. Indigenous peoples in particular have been left feeling more cornered than ever, although one participant commented that “we have always been in a bad situation.”

Still, the participants wondered aloud how they could communicate their concerns “without triggering unrest.” This is even as a participant said that they cannot do anything regarding some issues because of new legislation, including one that now makes it easier to bring foreign workers in. According to one participant, the legions of Chinese workers being brought in for some projects have already started attracting the attention of locals, who may soon turn resentful. The participant said that the Chinese workers speak neither

Bahasa Indonesia nor English because the Chinese government “does not want them to communicate with locals.” This can only heighten tensions between the workers and the locals since they cannot understand each other.

There was also an admission that Indonesia is “not really a democracy” and is becoming even less so with what appears to be the “erosion” of civil society. One participant commented that while the ADN project highlights the intrusion of China’s non-democratic ways into countries such as Indonesia, “we also need to reflect on our own situation.” This later led to questions on whether or not Jakarta’s activities with Beijing were already affecting regulations, especially those covering the digital landscape. “Are we following China’s digital autocracy?” one participant asked. He also pointed out that with Chinese technology practically building Indonesia’s digital ecosystem, “we are taking more risks,” especially with the data being collected by Chinese software.

With many agreeing that a significant part of Indonesia’s civil society has already been “captured” by the government, the consensus was that media should be the major player in ensuring that important issues are not left by the wayside. How that would come about, however, was not discussed.

PHILIPPINES

Unlike the sessions in Bangkok and Jakarta that focused mainly on local issues, the Manila session devoted more time discussing China’s behavior in the Asia Pacific and the evolution of the Chinese Communist Party through the years. But there were at least four observations that were particularly pertinent to the Philippines. One was that in the dealings with China, there is an elite consolidation of economic and political power going on. The second was that not all Chinoys (Chinese Filipinos) are really pro-Beijing, and that China and its activities in the Philippines have sparked an ongoing conflict within the Chinoy community. Connected with this was the assertion of one participant that when it comes to private sector – including the Chinoys – involvement with Chinese projects, the motivation is not political but financial. As the participant put it, “it’s all about how to get your money’s worth.” The fourth locally focused observation was that Chinese influence in post-EDSA Philippines had come in three waves: economic, during the time of Arroyo; political, during the time of Duterte; and cultural and intellectual, which has been happening throughout the past few decades through media and the academe. According to one participant, it is the third wave that is the most frightening and worrisome because of what he called the “virality factor.” As it is, he said, some Filipino academics and media outlets already sound as if they are mouthpieces of Beijing.

The discussions had actually started off with the participants exchanging views on what happened after the Western powers “disappeared” from the region, especially in the Indo

Pacific. One participant noted that up until recently, ASEAN remained of interest in economic forums but was significantly absent along with the rest of the Pacific region when it came to defense and foreign policy discussions among Western powers. This gave China the chance to go on a “very aggressive charm offensive in the region,” according to another participant. Today the Western powers are making a comeback in the region, but they are finding China already entrenched in many areas.

A participant then said that China and its people must be differentiated from the Chinese Communist Party, which is what is actually dealing with the governments in the region. The discussion then veered toward how the CCP had abandoned some socialist tenets and now displayed a “severe concentration of power” in the person of Xi Jinping. This has had profound impact on how Chinese state departments and agencies have been behaving, with many of their actions aimed at currying favor with Xi.

It was also pointed out that China’s behavior abroad shows signs of the CCP’s united front strategy. This is composed of: a) conquering the hearts and minds of overseas Chinese; b) making the foreigners serve China (i.e. let the locals “sell” China); and c) making the CPP the loudest voice in the world. The strategy has also become the major vehicle for exporting CPP’s non-democratic values and has proved effective in exploiting weaknesses of target countries and communities.

This observation prompted comments that Philippine democracy has its own flaws and problems, and that its internal weaknesses allow non-democratic intrusions, which in turn only worsen such weaknesses. One participant, however, said that Filipino bureaucrats have not been blind to the flaws of deals struck with the Chinese government and Chinese state firms, and are in fact causing the delay in many state projects involving these entities. Put simply, the participant said, the bureaucrats are not signing the contracts or “dribbling” them to avoid possible legal troubles in the future.

Some examples cited regarding Beijing’s efforts to expand its influence bear mentioning. One academic recounted how the Chinese Embassy offered to set up a “Chinese collection” at his university, while another said that the Chinese government has been offering PhDs to scholars with no need to do real academic work. He said that while Western governments offer scholarships as well, the difference lies in the fact that degrees from U.S. and other Western universities still require class work and academic papers. That China has chosen not to do so, he said, is lowering the value of the degrees awarded by Chinese universities.

Another participant meantime said that there are instances when the Chinese state need not lift a finger to pressure local communities into making a situation favorable to Beijing. She said that a protest launched by Chinese students led to the cancellation of a class at an Australian university, with the professor also issuing an apology. The professor had

compared Xi to Winnie the Pooh, and the Chinese students had insisted that was a grave insult to the Chinese leader.

FIJI

The Zoom session on Fiji, like the one conducted in Manila, ended up discussing regional issues more than local ones. Or to be more exact, much of the discussions were centered on China's behavior in the Pacific. A participant even raised a question regarding the extent geopolitics was having an impact on disinformation in the nations' domestic politics. In the end, most were in agreement that transparency and accountability are vital demands when dealing with Beijing or with any other major power for that matter. Engagement has to be fair and equal terms, the participants said.

Suggestions on how to address the issues raised during the session were obviously regional in nature as well. For Western powers, the participants said that diplomatic engagement with China itself was important. They also said that Western countries should provide support to those trying to defend themselves against the non-democratic incursions from China. There was a call as well for a more strategic alliance among like-minded nations.

The role of the media was again brought up to bring issues to light, educate the public about these, and encourage public discourse. There was a realization, however, that this would happen only if Fiji were to become more liberal, its press freer, and its citizens able to speak out more.

It was at the Fiji session, though, that a participant raised the strongest objections on what he seemed to think was a wrong portrayal of China by the other participants. He said that there was no evidence to back the "allegations" on China that were "provocations by the Western media." He described the economic burden of Chinese loans on Fiji as a "myth," and said that there was "absolutely no way that China can put pressure through debts."

The session, however, began with a participant observing that one of the problems Fijians have with Chinese activities in their country is that these are usually opaque. "We don't know what the government is doing," the participant said, "until after the contract has been signed and after the activity starts." She also noted that prior to 2018, the Fijian media were also "intimidated" and "afraid to speak out" about Chinese activities in the country. The participant cited the case of Malolo island, where a Chinese company was supposed to build a casino but was later found to be doing serious environmental damage to be able to construct its project. The Fijian media knew about what the company was doing, said the participant, but it was only after a New Zealand journalist broke the story that the local press finally cover the story.

Most of the participants agreed that China became a major presence in the Pacific because of the withdrawal of the Western powers, including Australia and New Zealand. One participant said that China “has every right to tell its story” and that it had made its way to the region at a time when the West saw no strategic importance in the Pacific. But he said that China’s arrival and consequent activities in the region had been accompanied by major concerns over its conduct. Specifically, China’s actions lacked transparency and accountability.

In recent years, the participant continued, there has been a major pushback from the United States and other Western countries, resulting in the slowing down of China’s “push forward” in the region. He also said that with the recent change in government in Fiji, the island nation seemed to be now taking a more pragmatic approach toward China.

Another participant noted that China had also come in the aid of some countries when they needed it most. The participant said that after the 2006 riots in Tonga, the Chinese government had given aid to that country for its rebuilding efforts. Two years ago, however, the Tongan prime minister spoke about the burden of Chinese loans on his country. The participant also noted the huge Chinese presence in Tonga that she said had the locals “intimidated.”

In response to the view that wariness toward China was unwarranted, one participant said that China has only itself to blame. He cited the case of the Solomon Islands, where the prime minister refused China’s bribes and ended up with his own government and Beijing working together to force him out of office. The participant also pointed to the damning letter written by the president of Micronesia regarding China’s bribery efforts in his country. According to the participant, the Micronesian president was followed around by Chinese embassy people while he was visiting Fiji. China behaves atrociously in maritime areas as well, he said.

“This is how China bullies the islands,” the participant said. “When China behaves like this, can you blame (people for being wary)?”