



MALIGN INTERFERENCE OPERATIONS ENTER ASEAN'S OFFICIAL DIALOGUE AGENDA

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Image: Circulating “polveron” videos of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Credit: Rappler

These days, the world is abuzz with the [cocaine rumor](#) surrounding President Macron. A similar [viral deepfake incident](#) previously targeted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Likewise, Philippine President Bongbong Marcos was also a [victim of face swap technology](#) in a parallel case last year. While AI remains a hot topic in global discussions on disinformation and malign influence, the Philippines has formally brought the issue of malign interference, particularly in the South China Sea, into focus at the [2025 ASEAN Maritime Security Dialogue](#).

Same actor, familiar stories.

In parallel with specific tactics, the People's Republic of China (PRC), an active player in information warfare, has been continuing with recurring narratives to pursue its strategic objectives in the SCS. According to Chong Jia Ian, a Singaporean political

scientist, the strategy includes the PRC's rejection of the legitimacy of UNCLOS, with an alternative interpretation of the rules-based order, despite being a signatory. It attempts to undermine the U.S. presence in the SCS, the vilification of the Philippines as a destabilizing actor in the region, and the exaggeration of the region's alleged economic overreliance on the PRC. Particularly, Chong highlights the PRC's narratives about ASEAN's economic dependency on China. The narrative looms large within the region as a source of distorted influence, even though it is not the definitive story. The economic interconnectedness is far more complicated, as shown in the full scope of ASEAN nations' trading configurations.

***“A lie repeated a thousand times becomes the truth.”
— (commonly attributed to Joseph Goebbels)***

Following the recent agenda on PRC-related disinformation concerns, the Philippines has become more resolute in bringing the issue to the table at international fora. While condemning China's economic and military coercion of its neighbors, the Bongbong Marcos administration has maintained strong criticism against the PRC despite the escalation risks. The Philippines' transparency initiative is now one of its primary instruments for countering China's malign interference operations. In parallel, the government has called for the establishment of an ASEAN intergovernmental body to resist China's sovereignty claims in the SCS and its proliferation of disinformation campaigns.

“Whoever controls the narrative, controls the people.” — Abhijit Naskar.

While the Philippines is raising its voice against the PRC's alleged aggressive behavior in the SCS, Malaysian public opinion seems to tilt otherwise. The turbulent global context of recent years—namely the conflict in Gaza since October 2023—combined with Malaysia's complex demographics (i.e., a strong pro-Palestine Muslim majority and a large ethnic Chinese minority), has simultaneously contributed to a sharp rise in Malaysian favorability toward China and amplifying negative perceptions of the US (Dr. Tricia Yeoh, personal communication, May 23, 2025). According to [Merdeka Center](#), a think tank in Malaysia, Malaysia's positive perception of China has grown dramatically from 39% to 77% between 2022 and 2024. This suggests that Beijing's support for Palestine in the Gaza conflict, along with the growing presence of its narratives on social media platforms targeting ethnic Chinese communities, appears to

have contributed to its success in undermining Washington's legitimacy within the country.

The turbulence around vaccination is also a notable source of fueling misinformation and disinformation across countries. With a large Chinese-speaking population, the situation in Malaysia became elusive and intricate when the public was exposed to unverified claims about vaccines. In particular, the supposed superiority of the Sinopharm vaccine overshadows adverse reports on Pfizer and AstraZeneca. A sizable ethnic Chinese population poses a higher risk for Malaysia, as these communities are more [susceptible to PRC-shaped narratives](#).

The local political context and media ecosystem (e.g., the growing presence of Chinese platforms like TikTok, Rednote, and WeChat) also play a pivotal role in shaping favorable sentiments among Malaysians. This is not a novel tactic in the PRC's playbook; [targeting ethnic Chinese communities](#) is a well-documented tool in state-sponsored influence operations. As such, inter-ethnic tensions in Malaysia appear increasingly vulnerable to threats from external malign influence strategies.

The need to do more

A reported 89% of Filipinos support the government's stance in the West Philippine Sea, underscoring the effectiveness of President Marcos' transparency strategy (Commodore Jay Tristan Tarriela, personal communication, May 23, 2025). However, outdated espionage laws remain a concern, prompting the need for legislative upgrades, including revisions to foreign espionage statutes and the adoption of a foreign malign influence or interference act. These calculated moves by the Philippines appear to be a wise, albeit risky, step forward, especially as the country navigates democratic complexity amid rising tensions in the SCS.

In the meantime, Chong recommends looking at the Taiwan and Australian models—both of which are considered high-experience testbeds for countering foreign malign influence. Though the situation remains complicated, proposals from experts and scholars to elevate the role of epistemic communities in the disinformation fight are being seriously considered. Others have raised concerns about “envelope diplomacy” in regional nations, where Chinese abalone, flowers, chocolate, and wine are routinely gifted in pursuit of Beijing's soft-power objectives (Dr. Rahman Yaacob, personal communication, May 23, 2025). This simultaneously

raises alarms over academic transparency. Likewise, the Philippines' stalled attempts to rally ASEAN reporters in support of its maritime campaign have proven exhausting. China's overwhelming military and economic influence appears to consistently outperform the Philippines' valiant efforts.

While discussions of Beijing's malign interference operations are overarching this year, the limited diversity of the ASEAN panel fails to portray the full scope of regional vulnerabilities. Delicate anxieties persist over the challenge of tightening legislation on foreign influence while preserving freedom of expression, especially within democratic societies, where such efforts are often accused of being [legislative opportunism](#). With each government holding a unique position vis-à-vis China, the question lingers: has the PRC's renowned “divide and conquer” doctrine become more effective than ever?

While efforts to confront disinformation in the region have moved beyond normative rhetoric, the path ahead suggests a future both promising and perilously complex for ASEAN.