

## How China Conducts Influence Operations by Leveraging Culturally Nuanced Narratives in Three Southeast Asian Countries

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### ***ABSTRACT***

*How do Chinese influence activities work in Southeast Asia? To answer this question, we take a strategic communication and narrative approach. Russia's cognitive warfare efforts are well studied but China's are less known. In that respect, we introduce our concept of China's "double zigzag" narrative strategy. We conduct a comparative case study to deepen our understanding of the nuanced ways in which China applies and disseminates its strategy in Southeast Asia—a region characterized by international maritime security concerns, developing economies and historical, cultural, and political traditions that differ dramatically from those in the West. We argue China has already launched its cognitive warfare in Southeast Asia by*

*leveraging and localizing its efforts according to cultural nuance. China's understanding of cultural nuance results in influence operations and strategic narratives that are customized across not only countries but also communities. China's strategic influence is prioritized as follows: erode trust in the United-States (U.S.)-Philippines alliance; leverage racial tensions by exploiting ethnic-Chinese in Malaysia; and engage in Islamic diplomacy to appease religious leaders in Indonesia. We conclude with policy implications.*

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century security environment, state and non-state actors have discovered that despite possession of highly advanced military technologies, global democracies are vulnerable to covert (and overt) forms of cognitive warfare that destabilize and erode key socio-political institutions. Cognitive warfare is defined here as “activities conducted in synchronization with other instruments of power, to affect attitudes and behaviors by influencing, protecting, and/or disrupting individual and group cognitions to gain an advantage” [1]. Adversarial state and non-state actors are incentivized to deploy such influence activities because they require minimal cost and risk. Likewise, cognitive warfare is effective in manipulating foreign citizens because humans are cognitively predisposed to absorbing manipulated information [2], [3], [4].

Faced with the threat of influence campaigns that target citizens (and bypass traditional nation-state power), national defense agencies have scrambled to research cognitive warfare through efforts that prioritize neurological and psychological defenses. While these initiatives are important and necessary, they tend to also result in solutions that are designed for universal, scalable, and replicable purposes. However, we argue that first, influence activities are effective because they prioritize socio-cultural nuances and target diverse audiences. Second, we argue that efforts to counter influence campaigns should acknowledge these cultural nuances and respond in ways that are flexible to the specific campaign.

Socio-cultural nuance needs further study as it leads to deeper understanding of the effects of influence campaigns, their mechanisms, and targets. We conduct a comparative case study of cognitive warfare efforts deployed by the People's Republic of China and analyze various forms of influence activities in Southeast Asia. In doing so, we base our study on narrative theory. The next section applies narrative theory to Chinese influence activities related to its geopolitical interests in the South China Sea. In doing so, we introduce the concept of a “double zigzag” that portrays China as an ascendant power destined to take over the role vacated by the declining West. We then conduct a comparative case study of Chinese influence activities in Southeast Asia and discuss how China targets different audiences in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. In the Philippines, China's strategic narrative targets geopolitical security concerns that: seed mistrust; seek to erode U.S. alliance; sideline democratically aligned elites; and lower confidence in the country's legal victory of its 2016 United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) arbitration claim against China over disputed waters [5]. In Malaysia, demographic and cultural nuance affords China the political ability to leverage racial tensions to ensure Malaysia's acquiescence and complicity over key geopolitical interests in the country by targeting the ethnic Chinese-Malay community. In Indonesia, narrative tactics work to convey China's tolerant relationship to Islam—something of diplomatic importance—to gain Indonesians' trust and continued cooperation amongst the controversial Uyghur human rights abuses [6]. We conclude by suggesting that psychological responses to counter-messaging must include similar cultural nuance.

## **2.0 UNDERSTANDING COGNITIVE WARFARE THROUGH NARRATIVE PRINCIPLES**

Before discussing how China applies cognitive warfare, we build our theoretical foundation in narrative theory. A narrative approach is better able to understand the nuances of targeted influence and propaganda. In fact, some argue that storytelling is the very reason humans developed communication and language [7].

During the formation of individualized societies, humans engaged in interactions and transactions with others. This required that humans understood and could communicate at an individual level, which occurred through a narrative format. As societies developed into more complex ones, there came a need to convey stories to others, recount things that happened in the past, and develop biographies of ourselves and others. Communication, particularly skilled storytelling, is a requirement for that. Although “narrative” has become something of a buzzword lately, often used as a synonym for “topic” or “theme,” the academic study of narrative goes much deeper than that.

We define narratives as systems of stories. Stories are rooted in conflict (or other deficiency), which results in a desire for a certain resolution (actual or projected), and where desire and resolution are linked by an arc of locations, events, actions, participants, and things, with progressing and complicating events [8]. For instance, the Russian perspective on Ukraine can be seen as a collection of stories. From the Russian point of view, Ukraine has no historical claim to statehood, creating a narrative “desire” in which Ukraine is “reunited” with Russia. All events and actions, including war, are projected to lead to this narrative resolution (though they may not do so in the end). Narratives are systems of such stories. Stories in a narrative are related, can exhibit emergence (the whole is more than the sum of the parts), and importantly, are hierarchically embedded in other systems [9]. The Ukraine story is closely related to other Eastern European stories and are remnants of centuries-old conflicts. As such, stories can be considered subordinate to larger or master narratives, and incorporate other stories that represent Russian nationalism, the country’s broader desire to claim territory in its vicinity, and conflicts with littoral countries who do not want it to invade. An even broader system contains stories about international relations and echo historical Cold War narratives as well as much older and nostalgic narratives of old empire and glory.

The above example demonstrates that narratives influence human thought and behavior. We like to think of ourselves as logical beings, who make choices based on carefully considered and rational cost-benefit calculations. Walter Fisher questions this [10, 11]. Because of how humans have learned to share information through storytelling, good stories are often more convincing and persuasive than arguments and facts. Narratives are human-evolved tools that simplify, organize, and make sense of complex information. Consequently, Fisher argues that human decision-making is not rational. Rather human decision making is based on how information is processed and reasoned according to each individual’s history, biography, culture, and how it fits into and resembles their experience and environment. To further this point, Fisher develops the concept of *narrative rationality*, which argues a story is “rational” when it meets two criteria. First, the story is *coherent*, meaning is the story structured in such a way that it is plausible that things happened in the way portrayed in the story. Second, the story has *fidelity*, meaning it resonates with other stories that the audience already knows and accepts to be true. Under this framework, logical reasoning is a type of story, but only one among many.

Narratives influence human thought and behavior by influencing the way we interpret events. Narrative functions as a type of cognitive schema that structures incoming information about the world [12]. The Russian government strategically framed events related to “NATO expansion” as a threat to its territorial integrity, thus using propaganda narratives to literally construct reality for its audiences [13]. Under a narrative lens, history itself is a system of stories about “what happened” in the past. Some historical narratives are widely known by members of an audience and accordingly have a strong influence on the way members of that audience perceive the world. Some are so familiar that they can be invoked with a single word or phrase, like “the Holocaust” or “the plague,” or more recently “9/11.” Invoking them immediately creates a framework for interpreting events and justifying action. Such narratives are not strategic in themselves, but they certainly can be *used* strategically.

The strategic use of narrative is frequently done through *vertical integration*. Here strategic communicators invoke a master narrative—a widely known story from history or religion—to frame events in a local narrative of the here-and-now. They then encourage individuals in the audience to align their personal stories with the master and local narratives and think/act accordingly. Adolph Hitler applied a historical master

narrative of the German Empires (first the Holy Roman Empire and then Imperial Germany) to claim a need for the creation of a Third Reich. Islamist extremists make frequent use of historical master narratives and vertical integration that are based on an array of stories from the Quran [14]. Vertical integration is also observable in ideologically driven domestic terrorism when individuals self-radicalize, as in the case of the Oklahoma City bombing [15].

Russia has been especially industrious in strategically using narratives for influence and propaganda purposes. At the time of the first Ukraine invasion of Crimea in 2014, analysts noted its reliance on a playbook that made heavy use of influence operations [16, 17]. Putin often speaks of himself as a historical figure, a tsar, to save the “great” Russian empire [18]. Narratives employed for this purpose accuse Ukraine of erasing the history of the Soviet Union and persecuting Russian ethnic minorities; engaging in rampant Ukrainian government corruption; and accuse Ukraine of being manipulated by a hidden cabal of Nazis. The Nazi narrative has been pushed again in the current cognitive warfare against Ukraine [19] and Vladimir Putin has been attempting to rewrite the historical narrative to claim that Ukraine is not a real country [20].

## 2.1 Narratives, Cognitive Warfare and China

Today narratives are used by nation-states for propaganda purposes. As discussed above, Russia does so but less studied are China’s efforts in weaponizing narrative for its cognitive warfare [21]. Curtis (2021) argues that from a narrative perspective, China’s strategy is more dangerous and compares Russian and Chinese strategic influence campaigns using the analogy of “terrorist” and “insurgent” [22]. Russian strategic influence can be characterized as “terrorism” in the information environment because its propaganda is designed to sow chaos, and undermine the West and the world order, yet it offers little as a better alternative [23, 24]<sup>1</sup>. In contrast, China’s strategic influence can be characterized as “insurgent.” While it shares Russian attempts to undermine and challenge the current system, it is much more mobilized in its campaign to ultimately replace the existing order with alternative institutions and a new vision of globalization and world order [25].

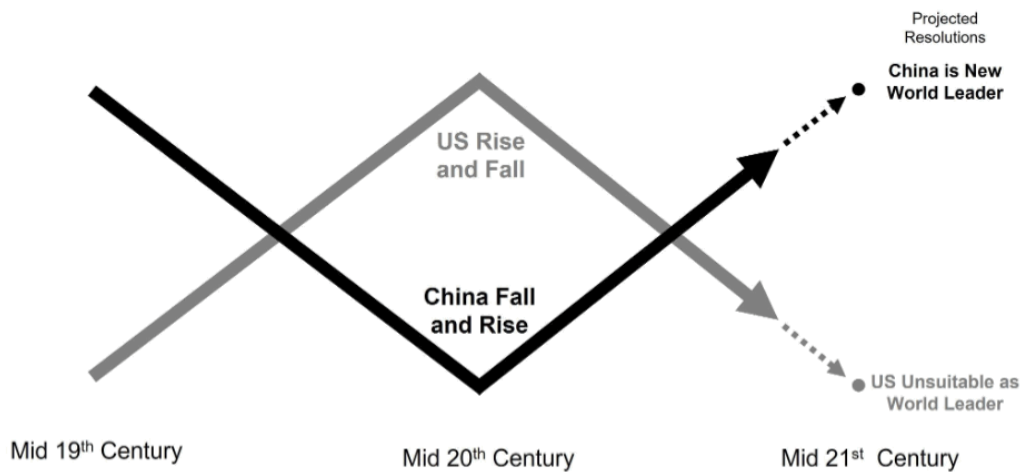
### 2.1.1 Modeling the Rise and Fall Narratives

In an article currently under review we build from Curtis (2021) and describe China’s overall strategy [26]. Zerubavel (2003) identifies several historiographic forms that societies use to collectively remember the past [27]. One of these is a *zigzag* narrative, which joins a *progress* narrative to a *decline* narrative, in one of two forms. One is a *rise-and-fall trajectory* in which success turns into failure (for example, the rise and fall of empires). The other is a *fall-and-rise trajectory* featuring stories of recovery, redemption, and overcoming adversity (for instance, being “born again” or post-disaster recovery). As depicted in **Error! Reference source not found.**, China’s double zigzag narrative strategy is a model that features a dramatic change of course marked by a distinct turning point. It depicts two stories occurring simultaneously where actors experience shifts of power over time. This model also illustrates how China wants to be represented today.

In the period from the mid-19th century to the current approach of the mid-21st century, China narrates itself using a fall-and-rise trajectory. The narrative begins with a “century of humiliation” [28]. Starting in the mid-1800s the country suffered wars and unequal treaties with Western powers (i.e. Hong Kong, Macao), the loss of elements of sovereignty, and losses to Japan in WWII. Then in the mid-1900s there was a change of course with the Chinese civil war and communist revolution. At that point China began a rise back to its former glory. Notwithstanding some occasional setbacks, China has grown ever stronger, both economically and militarily, ever since and aims to achieve “national rejuvenation” by the 100th anniversary of the revolution [29]. Today it sees itself on par with other major world powers and seeks to assume leadership on the international stage.

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<sup>1</sup> This differs than Russian Cold War disinformation when communist ideology operated to persuade the world that it was a better alternative to the current system and a narrative was provided that offered a vision for how the world could look and be.



**Figure 1: China’s double zigzag narrative strategy. The time scale is approximate.**

Part of China’s master narrative invokes conflicts, obstacles, and challenges that must still be overcome for China’s true potential to be met and for it to achieve its highest form of international “rise”. From the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) point of view, Taiwan is a remnant of the conflict between Mao’s communist leadership and the defeated nationalists who fled to an island 100 miles off China’s coast. This CCP-made conflict creates a desire for a resolution, namely that Taiwan is “reunited” with China, and all the events, actions, etc., we see today are parts of an arc that may (or may not) lead to this resolution.

Of course, there is competition for world leadership, meaning China cannot be content just narrating its own fall-and-rise. So, it also narrates its most important competitor with a parallel rise-and-fall narrative. At the midpoint of its fall, China viewed the United States (U.S.) as a model of national development and success [30]. Following its own civil war, the U.S. steadily grew both economically and militarily until it reached a zenith of power in the mid-1900s. But then, according to the Chinese tale, the U.S. began a fall, abusing its power and exploiting others: “Since becoming the world’s most powerful country after the two world wars and the Cold War, the United States has acted more boldly to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, pursue, maintain and abuse hegemony, advance subversion and infiltration, and willfully wage wars, bringing harm to the international community” [31]. Additionally, any action taken by the U.S. in the Asian region, whether it be providing Taiwan with defense capabilities or ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, is framed by the CCP as aggressive, antagonistic, provocative, and faulty.

China’s double zigzag strategy has two aims. First, convince their audience in the region and the world that the U.S. is a washed-up power that no longer has the capability to lead. Second, convince the audience that China has learned from its failures and grown to become a powerful and ascendant country. While the U.S. was using its power for evil and exploitation, China was overcoming adversity, avoiding conflict, having benevolent intentions, and spreading sweetness and light everywhere. Thus, the U.S. has lost, and China has earned moral authority to be a world leader. As depicted in Figure 1, China’s strategic narratives of global processes, whether they be political, social, economic, or military in nature, frame China as becoming more fit to lead while simultaneously framing the U.S. as becoming more unsuitable to lead. In taking this narrative approach, we next will analyze and compare the nuances of cases of pro-China narratives that spread in Southeast Asia. We will analyze the narratives and discuss implications for cognitive warfare responses and mitigation, but first we describe our research design and methods that enable our analysis.



## 3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

### 3.1 Comparative Case Study Approach

How can we better understand China's cognitive warfare and influence activities in Southeast Asia? We take a qualitative approach to answering this research question. We conduct a comparative analysis of three countries in a case study in Southeast Asia: the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. With a population of about 650 million people and a combined GDP of over US\$ 3.3 trillion, Southeast Asia includes some of the fastest and most vibrant developing economies in the world [32]. China heavily invests in this market, exerts its control, and expands its influence here while simultaneously experiencing its own economic cooling. Southeast Asia has become more relevant and important in geopolitical affairs because of dangerous military contention over the South China Sea [33]. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, an estimated \$3.37 trillion worth, or 21% of all global trade, transits through the South China Sea [34]. This body of water is an important global resource for fishing, oil, and minerals. China has unjustifiably staked extensive and overwhelming claims in these waters, and built artificial islands equipped with facilities (runways, etc.), making the South China Sea remains one of the most dangerous bodies of water in the world. The sovereignty of several countries has been violated, which also represents a threat to maintaining territorial sea and international maritime law [35].

Studying China's cognitive warfare efforts in this region is important for anyone interested in countering them. Security and defense are a growing concern in Southeast Asia, a region characterized by fledgling democracies and political traditions and values that are dramatically different from the West. It is also a region characterized by extensive cultural, ethnic, and language diversity that presents vulnerability.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the following seeks to better understand China's cognitive warfare strategies vis-à-vis Southeast Asia. To do so we conduct a qualitative case-study comparison of Chinese narrative strategies in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

### 3.2 Data Sources

Our team has collected two categories of data sources: fieldwork data and digital data. Our field-work data includes panel discussions of subject matter experts (SMEs) in the Asia-Pacific region. Our SMEs had diverse backgrounds and included scholars, policymakers, retired military officers, and media professionals related to Chinese politics in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore. We conducted a total of 13 panel discussions with 37 participants between April 2021 and September 2023. To complement our field work data, we collected digital data from several sources. We have approximately 90,000 tweets that were queried based on keywords derived from the SME discussions covering various issues related to the South China Sea in each country.<sup>3</sup> We also collected news articles from Chinese State Media (CSM) sources (e.g., Xinhua, Global Times) and scrapped text from official PRC government websites (e.g., Foreign Ministry). We also gathered Western texts (e.g., Foreign Policy), news sources, think tank reports, and defense-based conference presentations.

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<sup>2</sup> In Indonesia alone, there are more than 700 living languages. In the Philippines and Malaysia, there are respectively 175 and 111 ethnolinguistic groups. [36]

<sup>3</sup> Queries are based on issues and keywords derived from subject-matter experts in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Topics were generally about the South China Sea and the Belt and Road Initiative. We collected about 40,000 tweets in the Philippines (in Tagalog and English); 30,000 tweets in Indonesia (Indonesian) and 20,000 tweets in Malaysia (Malaysian and English). For the purposes of qualitative coding, we filtered this large sum of data through measures that we deemed collectively represented more relevant and influential content. We filtered according to users' social media reach, their posts' views, and network visibility. In some cases, we also re-filtered our data a second time, using measures of keyword count (all) and distinct keyword density to filter posts that included at least 4 keywords within the query and prioritizing those tweets over tweets with only one or two keywords. These decisions created the basis for us to filter data in a measurable order to better parse out relevant posts and pull more important narratives from the data while separating out less relevant data. Qualitative coders then reviewed and annotated the posts in the order of most relevant. The coders in total reviewed approximately the top 3,000 posts in each country's specific dataset (1,000 each).

## 4.0 CHINA'S COGNITIVE WARFARE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Like Russia, China uses strategic narrative for influence campaigns, but its efforts are understudied, particularly in Southeast Asia. The “double zigzag” narrative strategy discussed above shows how China represents itself positively while representing the U.S. negatively. In Southeast Asia, it does this by framing the American military presence in the Asia-Pacific. The CCP follows a “double zigzag” framework by referring to the U.S. as bellicose and warmongering while framing itself as neutral, peace-loving, and non-interfering [37]. According to CCP propaganda, the U.S. has illegal partnerships with Taiwan for expansionist endeavors. It provocatively encroaches upon Chinese sovereignty and recruits countries in Southeast Asia, like the Philippines, into war and chaos. Moreover, it rejects the idea that the U.S. and its allies maintain freedom of navigation in international waters, claiming that this is a guise for American oppression, control, and interference that destabilizes the region.

In the South China Sea, China argues the U.S. presence is creating the grounds for a new Cold War [38, 39].<sup>4</sup> Xi Jinping often says that the U.S. has renewed its Cold War style “containment policy” [42]. Instead of containing communism, however, the goal is “containing” China’s rise, prosperity, and leadership. The CCP narrative sometimes frames China as suffocating from forces that seek to besiege or assault it and where actors such as Taiwan and the Philippines are sometimes framed as traitors to Asia. Other times, they are framed as American proxies fighting their wars. China will also point to the U.S. building alliances in the region (e.g., AUKUS, the Quad) to further support their narratives that they are at risk of being invaded, thus giving themselves the moral authority to defend and protect their sovereignty [43, 44].<sup>5</sup> Interestingly however, China does not disseminate this narrative equally in the region. It is also culturally nuanced and localized. Next, we conduct a comparative case study to show how this narrative, as well as others, operate in local and cultural contexts in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

### 4.1 Localizing Influence Campaigns in the Philippines

Our social media and CSM analysis revealed similar narratives to the ones above claiming that American forces use the region to “surround” China, tailored to the specific Philippine context. Their goal is to undermine and break down the U.S.-Philippine alliance. Official CCP government online accounts, such as the Chinese Embassy in Manila, view the U.S. presence as causing turmoil and argue against the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and the partnered large-scale annual military exercises (Balikatan). These official Chinese accounts also contributed to already trending hashtags such as #USTroopsOutNow, #NoToEDCA, and #JunkEDCA.

Local accounts that have been linked with the CCP include those associated with Manila Bulletin, the Manila Times, the Governor of Cagayan Manuel Mamba, and even former President Rodrigo Duterte [45, 46, 47, 48]. Powerfully, some local accounts argue that Filipinos should not die for America. Local Filipinos chastise their country online for allowing a neo-colonial and imperialist American infestation in their country as they provide the U.S. with the means to succeed. U.S. military personnel are also framed in the Philippines as transphobes, criminals, rapists, and murderers in light of a controversial event [49]. Even some Western sources see “Washington elites” as provoking China and claim the U.S. military drills or “war games” could “devastate” the Philippines [50, 51]. We also found a known Russian disinformation blog (globalresearch.ca) that referred to similar narratives that blames the Philippine Armed Forces for providing the U.S. with the ability to surround China with war machinery [52].

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<sup>4</sup> One report has claimed the CCP has put together the No Cold War group - a Soviet-style front organization pacifist movement to spread Chinese propaganda that it is not an enemy but a neutral and friendly power while framing the U.S. as the aggressive provocateur [40, 41].

<sup>5</sup> We found a documentary film called *The Coming War*. The director, Australian John Pilger has interviewed on official Chinese state media found in a CGTN YouTube video.

China's narrative in the Philippines attempts to question, denigrate, and erode the Philippine-U.S. alliance, arguing it is dangerous for the country and could unnecessarily drag it into war. This narrative finds synergy with another local foreign policy narrative in Philippine society that was pervasive between the years 2016-2022 – during a Rodrigo Duterte administration that heavily favored China. The local narrative argued that as the Philippines has yet to complete the modernization of its armed forces, any military confrontation would be detrimental to the country. The best course of action for the Philippines, therefore, was to stand down and not instigate a fight to begin with. As we have argued elsewhere, China's influence efforts thus intersect with local contexts that led the Philippines into a defeatist stance [53]. In several instances, President Duterte articulated that if war were to break out, the Philippines would inevitably lose, implying that provoking China would only result in the Philippines' defeat.

This defeatist attitude is further nuanced when pro-China outlets emphasize a colonial angle, i.e., that, unlike the U.S. who colonized and then defeated the Philippines in the Philippine-American War of 1899-1902, China has never been a colonial master and should then be distinguished from other great powers. Set against this framing, this narrative is two-pronged: China is a benevolent great power, but if provoked, it would not hesitate to lash out, which would then spell the Philippines' defeat. Furthermore, the only way for the Philippines to reap the benefits of this benevolence is if it would turn away from its alliance with the U.S. In this regard, China was also successful in exerting narrative influence over the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea dispute. As Duterte's "war on drugs" campaign turned into violent crimes against humanity, the West withdrew foreign aid. China jumped in and offered benefits, extending development assistance in exchange for the downplaying of incidents involving China's maritime militia in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. The Philippines lost in this deal because its domestic narratives undermined their UNCLOS arbitration victory.

Overall, this section has laid out how some of China's influence activities are embedded into cultural nuances unique to the Philippines in narrative strategy. China's localized narrative argues that the Philippines must not provoke it because conflict would inevitably lead to defeat. To ensure cooperation, the Philippines must turn away from its American allies who are framed as warmongers, colonialists, and murderers. By turning away from the U.S. as Duterte did, the Philippines became more vulnerable to Chinese influence. Simultaneously, its democratic institutions, human rights, and maritime legal victory were undermined. Our findings in the Philippines case study are noticeably not observed in Malaysia or Indonesia due to as the Philippine-U.S. relationship is unique in the region, largely because of colonial history. As such, China can prioritize other means of influence that are more conducive to its interests in other countries. Next, we turn to how this plays out in Malaysia. Namely, unlike in the Philippines, Malaysia is vulnerable to China influence via political and business channels through its ties to the ethnic-Chinese-Malay population.

## **4.2 Localizing Influence Campaigns in Malaysia**

In contrast to the Philippines, China leverages fragile racial tensions and its ties with ethnic Chinese Malays—constituting approximately 25% of the population—to manipulate political and business elites and expand its influence. Malaysian racial riots, known as the "ghost of 1969," resulted in affirmative action post-restructuring that favored the Malays and alienated ethnic Chinese. This event is at the historical root of China-Malaysia discord. The fragility of social and racial relationships between Malays and ethnic-Chinese makes Malaysia vulnerable regarding its relationship with China. Digital media data collection and local expert interviews substantiate China's use of culturally nuanced narratives and how this plays out in the several ways.

The first is that Malaysia, who also has stakes in the South China Sea, is comparatively less resistant to China's growing presence. This contrasts with the Philippines where there exists more intense opposition to China's unjustified claims that breach the sovereignty of other nations. We argue that this noticeable difference occurs through culturally nuanced narratives. In Malaysia, China is more successful at persuading the country of their "friendly" intentions. This "friendship" narrative frames China as a benevolent power



with a shared history and culture. The message is that China and Malaysia share a strong and cooperative bilateral relationship. The invocation of the friendship narrative also tells us that even friends can sometimes behave in unfriendly ways. This works to manage some episodic incidents, for example when Chinese Coast Guard vessels anchor in Malaysia's exclusive economic zone.

At the same time, Malaysia is aware of the creeping normalization of Chinese presence in the South China Sea. Like other countries in Southeast Asia, Malaysia works to balance powers using soft diplomacy and policies of "pragmatism" and "non-alignment" [54]. This can afford Malaysia a level of flexibility to speak up, oppose, and resist Chinese incursions, but only to an extent. The added complexity of appeasing a politically and demographically prominent ethnic-Chinese base that can be sympathetic to the mainland limits Malaysia's ability to more firmly oppose Chinese incursions on its sovereignty. As such, Malaysians prefer keeping social harmony by avoiding political opinions that could disrupt the fragile/delicate balance. This leads to more "tiptoeing" and incentives not to "rock the boat".

The second way China uses culturally nuanced narratives is through overt and covert political influence that targets pro-China domestic political parties [55]. For example, China attempted to influence Malaysia's 2018 election and increase support for the incumbent Prime Minister Najib tun Razak [56]. Najib's coalition included the ethnic-Chinese party, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) which supported China's interests. During the election campaign China appealed to the ethnic Chinese population. Chinese-language media – 90% of which is owned by one tycoon with close business ties to China - worked to promote and distribute content that was pro-China [57]. In addition, China may have also used more covert economic coercion to influence the vote and implement BRI project [58]. China's election influence and support for both the MCA and Najib's coalition may have backfired, as they did not win the 2018 election for the first time in history. However, since then COVID-19 and economic issues have led to a considerable amount of political turmoil and instability. The current PM, Anwar Ibrahim, has made decisions to strengthen ties with China and be more open to BRI funding as the value of country's currency plummets. Anwar's rhetoric around BRI projects nationalizes the issue and returns to the narrative before 2018 when BRI was framed as a new form of global connectivity, development, and Malaysian prosperity.

In summary, China leverages both overt and covert forms of political and economic influence in Malaysia to advance its interests vis-à-vis its connections with the influential ethnic-Chinese Malay population. Cultural nuances in Malaysia keep racial tensions at the surface of society, which have become central to our analysis. Cognizant of these racial societal tensions, Malaysians prefer keeping harmony by avoiding political opinions that could disrupt the fragile/delicate balance. Malaysia has historically (and relative to our other case countries) also been less democratic and generally more vulnerable to Chinese influence. Next, we explain how, in Indonesia, China leverages the political power of religious leaders and organizations and curates its culturally nuanced narratives to fit Islamic perspectives.

### **4.3 Localizing Influence Campaigns in Indonesia**

The ethnic-Chinese that make up almost 25% of the population in Malaysia; however, in Indonesia (and the Philippines) their share of the population size is much smaller, around two to three percent, meaning they are less politically influential. In addition, Mandarin is commonly spoken in Malaysia, but Indonesians use six different dialects of Chinese. This makes it harder for the CCP to efficiently exercise influence through political channels. As a result, China faces two roadblocks to entering Indonesian politics: anti-Chinese sentiment, and discrimination against non-Muslims who run for office [59].

At about 274 million people, Indonesia has the fourth largest population in the world. Equally important, it is also the world's largest Muslim majority country. As such, political influence and power lies in religious organizations (like *Muhammadiyah* and *Nahdlatul Ulama*). Because channels of political influence lie in Islamic religious leaders and religious organizations, China prioritizes "Islamic diplomacy" in Indonesia. Consistent with the double-zigzag narrative, China promotes a positive self-image, localized in

Indonesia through the Islamic perspective. At the same time, it frames the U.S. as an anti-Muslim country, pointing to America's "war on terror," support for Israeli oppression of Palestinians, and other policy failures in the Middle East. This Chinese "whataboutism" diminishes attention to its abuses of Uyghur human rights [60, 61].

Thus, China's "Islamic diplomacy" is multifold and extends across channels of influence. One of the most important and prominent efforts promotes the mythology of Cheng Ho (also known as Zheng He). This narrative portrays China as a friend of Muslims since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Xi Jinping and other ministers reference the mythical admiral Cheng Ho as a peaceful, morally sophisticated diplomat and a symbol of modern China's "peaceful rise" [62, 63]. He is referenced at occasions in Indonesia that celebrate China's tolerant relationship to Islam or that celebrate the Belt and Road Initiative [64]. This narrative has since been localized and expanded by some in Indonesia to claim that Cheng Ho, in addition to being a pious Muslim, also contributed to spreading Islam in Indonesia. Moreover, this mythological figure represents a shared cultural heritage that can be used to strengthen Chinese-Indonesian relations that aid in the "transformation" of Chinese Indonesians from strangers to cultural citizens [65]. The Cheng Ho campaign also works to legitimize pro-China policies. Cognitive warfare in this respect uses the mythology of Cheng Ho to advance illegitimate claims of China's rights to the South China Sea [66, 67]. It works to "mollify littoral nations" [68] by using exaggerated and inaccurate historical accounts that act as a "backbone" to assert and justify the 9-dash-line [69, 70].

In another instance, China's "Islamic diplomacy" functions to influence education. As Cheng Ho mosques are commonly found throughout Indonesia, and because of the false narrative that China "brought" Islam to Indonesia, this narrative, exemplified in a popular hadith in Indonesia, works to persuade, or at least support, decisions that Indonesian students make in going to study in China [71, 72]. Increasingly, Islamic students in Indonesia, known as *santri*, have been offered Chinese government scholarships in attempts to promote more interest in student's looking to study and pursue education in China. As a result, when students return home, they sometimes promote positive pro-China stances. For example, some Indonesian social media influencers that studied in China defend China's controversial Uyghur human rights abuses [73, 74, 75]. In summary, China focuses its narrative efforts by portraying its regime as an ally to the Islamic world while also framing the U.S. as an anti-Muslim power. The next section provides a discussion and implication of these findings.

## **5.0 DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Overall, the comparative case-study presented in this article shows that China's cognitive warfare is already present and dynamic in Southeast Asia. We argue that narrative nuances and cultural contexts matter because China's cognitive warfare efforts in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia are adapted to local circumstances. In other words, China's efforts are specialized for the appropriate context and narratives are prioritized accordingly. We draw two overall implications for efforts to counter China's cognitive warfare.

First, counter-messaging must not rely on strictly psychological or cognitive approaches that seek to find messages that are replicable, scalable, and universal. China's cognitive warfare is nuanced: it reinforces anti-imperialist, nationalist, and populist notions in the Philippines; it leverages its racial and political relationship with ethnic-Chinese in Malaysia; and it targets religious actors through diplomatic channels in Indonesia. A one-size-fits-all approach to messaging that does not account for social and cultural context cannot counter these efforts successfully. China's ability to leverage nationalism, ethnicity, and religion – powerful forces that inform individual identity and serve as avenues of finding meaning and belonging – should be acknowledged and respected by the security and defense research community. Accordingly, future analyses should incorporate narrative and culture for more robust and complete understandings of how China's cognitive warfare operates and where China experiences asymmetric power and influence capabilities.

Second, messaging should be based on narrative engagement, not one-and-done broadcasting. Policymakers typically exercise influence by providing incentives like economic benefits or security guarantees. Yet these incentives do not have fixed and universal value. What value do security guarantees provide if they can be framed by our adversary as imperialism in the Philippines, as ethnic provocation in Malaysia, or as a trojan horse from anti-Muslims in Indonesia? A narrative approach tells us that to achieve cognitive security, we must look at the problem as primarily a human rather than a technical problem. Cognitive warfare is not primarily about whether bots spread truth or lies, nor is it about identifying and attributing inauthentic amplification. Rather, cognitive warfare is about how humans understand stories.

Our research points to narrative – systems that reveal context and sense-making in the information environment – as a means to improve computational modeling, detection, tracking, and projection of influence. Responding to cognitive warfare requires that we expand our current efforts (e.g., computational analyses, social network analyses, media forensics, etc.) to include modeling how information is understood. Furthermore, our analysis concludes that sometimes narrative influences are so deeply embedded and complex that they do not present themselves on social media (for instance, we have found little evidence of the China education narrative in Indonesian social media). To overcome this obstacle, researchers must partner more with subject matter experts in the field to inform cognitive warfare efforts.

Given sufficient knowledge of country specific cultures and contexts, we suggest it may also be possible to predict which political targets China has access to, which they might attempt influence, and which narratives will be more effective than others. This knowledge would aid in moving from reactive to proactive counter-messaging. An audience's core beliefs are diverse, so messages that touch them need to be different. Accordingly, generic counter narrative strategies risk being ineffective and, worse, may be perceived as inauthentic. With a more nuanced understanding of social contexts, strategies can be better targeted, more specific and have enough depth that they can appeal to identity and belonging. Finally, if cognitive resilience requires trust, deep understanding, and acceptance, potential pathways forward could also include partners that engage in respectful dialogue that genuinely embody values of commonality, building real personal connections and engaging in empathy towards others.

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