

01 / 05 / 2024

Indonesia

Chinese Digital Influence in Southeast Asia



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Introduction

Executive Summary

In the second part of our ongoing series on Chinese digital influence in Southeast Asia we are taking a closer look at Indonesia.

Indonesia has the largest population and economy in Southeast Asia and is the most populous Islamic country in the world. It boasts large deposits of natural resources such as oil, gas, nickel, gold, tin, and copper. It is one of the largest agricultural exporters in the world with nearly 30% of the land in the country used for agriculture and has a fast-expanding fisheries industry. Under the guidance of President Jokowi Widodo Indonesia seen unprecedented economic growth an ongoing modernization of the country's infrastructure and an increasingly flourishing tech sector, which has seen companies such as Tokopedia and Gojek arise.

Geographically the country is a strategically important crossroad between the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. All major shipping lanes between the 2 regions, mainly through the Malacca Strait, need to pass along the Indonesian coastline.

The demographic, economic and geographic factors explain much of the activity of Chinese influence in Indonesia. The country is a key regional player and increasingly taking up a prominent role on the international field, making it a priority for world powers such as China.

Key findings:

- China is using both official and unofficial digital channels to push its narratives in Indonesia.
- Key narratives are focused on shading a positive light on the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang, discrediting Japan around the Fukushima incident and the release of the treated water from the power plant, positive messaging about religious freedom in China.
- We have uncovered coordinated inauthentic behavior following Chinese methodologies and narratives in Indonesia. More research in future will surely bring more instances to the light.

Historical Background

The 20th century has seen a very contentious relationship between Indonesia and China. Indonesia officially gained independence from the Netherlands in 1949. The first president of Indonesia Sukarno, also known as the father of the nation, based his power both on the military and the PKI (the communist party of Indonesia) and increasingly deepened relations with China and the USSR. This led to a severe backlash by Islamic and nationalist groups and the military, which ultimately led to Sukarno's downfall and the rise of Suharto and his "New Order". One of Suharto's "New Order" narratives was that the previous government was a puppet of the China. In the aftermath it came to a nationwide anti-communist purge leading to anything between 500,000 and 1 million deaths. A significant amount of the victims was of Chinese descent.

In 1967, the New Order government issued Presidential Instruction (Inpres) No. 14/1967, which banned Chinese culture and language. In parallel all diplomatic ties with China were cut and only reinstated in 1990. The anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia targeting Chinese Indonesians sent an uproar through China. Nevertheless, Indonesian-Chinese relations in recent years have been increasingly close, with China putting much effort in building and maintaining cordial relations with Indonesia.

China's influence in Indonesia

Online Influence

In recent years China's online influence in Indonesia increased due to several reasons. There is increased Chinese state media sources' online activity in Bahasa Indonesia as well as recruitment of local journalists to "tell China's story." In addition, Chinese media sources such as Xinhua and China Daily have content-sharing agreements with Antara News Agency, Media Indonesia, and The Jakarta Post¹. According to Freedom House, a research institute which is based in Washington D.C., Indonesian Chinese-language news sources increasingly promote pro-China content.² Moreover, prominent Muslim organizations from Indonesia were invited to visit Xinjiang, and members received scholarships to study in China. The Chinese embassy in Indonesia also funded tours for Indonesian social media influencers to visit areas near Xinjiang.³

In 2020, Reuters reported that the Chinese tech company ByteDance (TikTok's parent company) censored content it perceived as critical of the Chinese government on its news aggregator app in Indonesia from 2018 to mid-2020. The report mentions that references to the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 and mentions of Mao Zedong were censored⁴. This is a strong indication of China's influence efforts in the Indonesian online and information sphere. Additional indications are reports of complaints that Indonesian journalists received from the Chinese government when they wrote articles that were not aligned with China's agenda. For example, The Chinese embassy in Jakarta criticized a journalist for writing that people detained in Xinjiang were not given trials⁵.

Chinese Official Accounts and Chinese State Media

The Xinjiang subject was utilized by Chinese sources and officials targeting Indonesian audiences to portray China as a protector of religious freedoms, and that the region is under constant development and a top tourist destination. For example, the following posts by Chinese officials and Chinese state media propagate the mentioned narrative to appeal to Muslim audiences:^{6 7}

¹ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/getting-narrative-right-china-s-media-reach-indonesia>

² <https://freedomhouse.org/country/indonesia/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>

³ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/getting-narrative-right-china-s-media-reach-indonesia>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-tiktok-indonesia-exclusive-idUKKCN2591LF/>

⁵ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-china-persuaded-one-muslim-nation-to-keep-silent-on-xinjiang-camps-11576090976>

⁶ https://twitter.com/Amb_LuKang/status/1689931274075652097

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/indonesian.cri.cn/videos/911050029706087/>





中华人民共和国驻印度尼西亚共和国大使馆

Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Indonesia

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Bahasa

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Wang Yi: The Purpose of Xinjiang-related Lies Is to Attempt to Prevent China's Development

2024-02-18 23:00

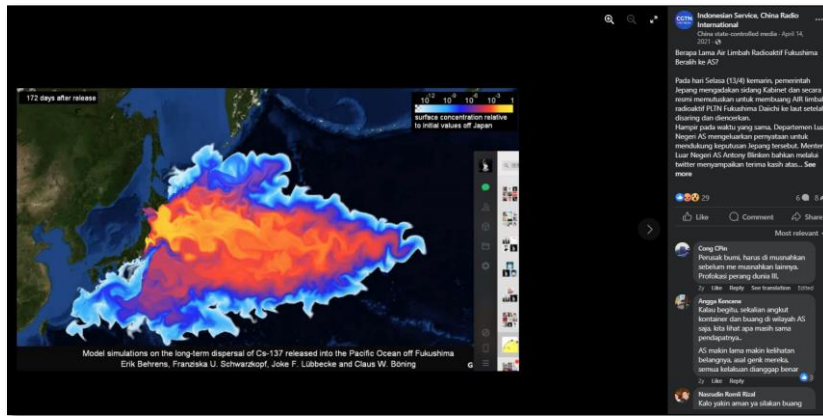
On February 17, 2024 local time, Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Foreign Minister Wang Yi attended the Munich Security Conference. He delivered a keynote speech and answered questions on the spot during the "Conversation with China" session, rebuking fallacies about the so-called "genocide" and "forced labor" in Xinjiang.

Wang Yi said, certain political forces have spread too many lies about Xinjiang and produced too much false information around the world. The so-called "genocide" is such a big lie. Since the establishment of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, the Uygur population has grown from over 3 million to more than 12 million nowadays. The average life expectancy of people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang has increased from 30 years to 75.6 years. Calling such facts the best evidence of protecting human rights, Wang Yi said the freedom of religious belief of all ethnic groups there has been well protected, citing examples that Muslims enjoy enough religious sites and the government has funded the repair and maintenance of mosques. Government documents and store signs are bilingual and the languages and cultures of various ethnic minorities, including the Uygurs, have been protected and passed on.

Like in other countries we examined, Chinese officials and state media sources propagated on their social media accounts disinformation regarding Japan's ALPS-treated water plan. For example, this misleading post in Bahasa Indonesia by Chinese state media CGTN on Facebook⁹:

⁸ http://id.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202402/t20240219_11246993.htm

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/indonesian.cri.cn/posts/pfbid025YBCeEKKjNY15VcB9acDfPqLBsh8t8NatSidSyceVZHa1mQCheE1KToSGxDq8YVl>

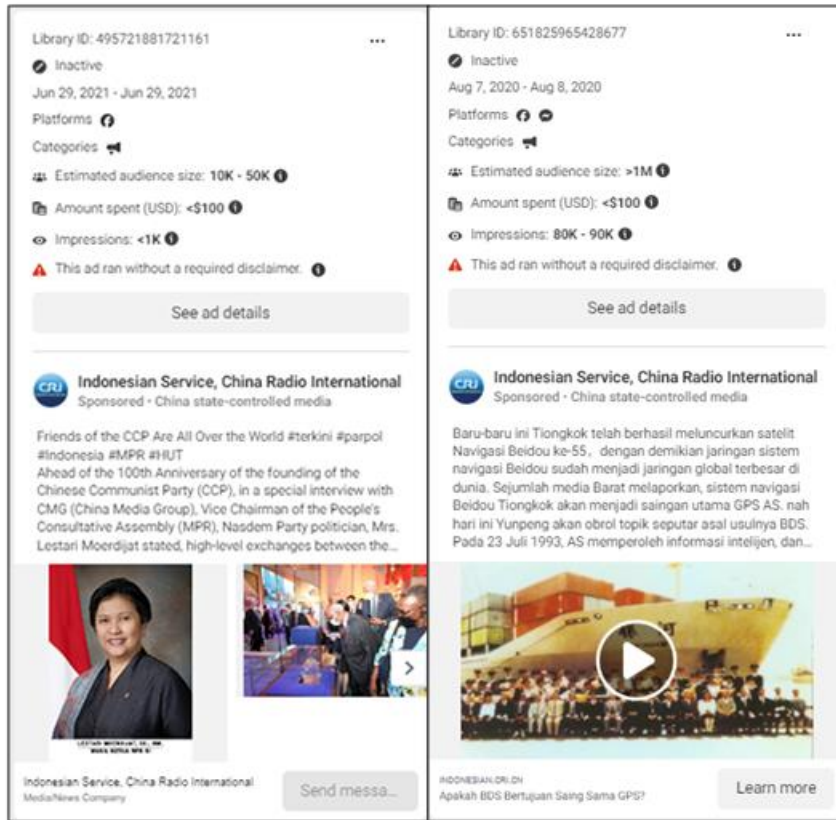


The same Facebook page also posted misleading content in the past regarding COVID-19 handling in the US¹⁰:



In addition, the CGTN Facebook page posted paid ads promoting Indonesian politicians and political issues, in Bahasa Indonesia. This shows foreign influence attempts by China, targeting the Indonesian public before elections. In addition, it was done without a required disclaimer, according to Meta:

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/indonesian.cri.cn/videos/537475244767813/>



China’s ambassador to Indonesia operates an X account, which is utilized to amplify its agenda regarding different subjects. For example, the ambassador amplified content expressing China’s opposition to Japan’s ALPS-treated water plan, by posting Chinese state media Xinhua content about it¹¹:



The Chinese embassy in Indonesia operates a Facebook page, which was also used to disseminate the Chinese agenda regarding different subjects, including Japan’s ALPS-treated

¹¹ https://twitter.com/Amb_LuKang/status/1678259498321063939

water plan. See an example post below, which included hashtags in Bahasa Indonesia as well as English¹²:

Embassy of China in Indonesia

July 6, 2023 · 🌐

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[Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on the IAEA's Releasing of a Comprehensive Report on the Disposal of Nuclear-contaminated Water at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station]

China noted a Comprehensive Report on the disposal of nuclear-contaminated water at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station released by the IAEA. It is learned that the report failed to fully reflect views from experts that participated in the review. The conclusion was not shared by all e... [See more](#)

<p style="text-align: center;">FOREIGN MINISTRY SPOKESPERSON'S REMARKS ON THE IAEA'S RELEASING OF A COMPREHENSIVE REPORT ON THE DISPOSAL OF NUCLEAR-CONTAMINATED WATER AT THE FUKUSHIMA DAIICHI NUCLEAR POWER STATION</p>	<p>CHINA NOTED A COMPREHENSIVE REPORT ON THE DISPOSAL OF NUCLEAR-CONTAMINATED WATER AT THE FUKUSHIMA DAIICHI NUCLEAR POWER STATION RELEASED BY THE IAEA.</p> <p>IT IS LEARNED THAT THE REPORT FAILED TO FULLY REFLECT VIEWS FROM EXPERTS THAT PARTICIPATED IN THE REVIEW. THE CONCLUSION WAS NOT SHARED BY ALL EXPERTS. THE CHINESE SIDE REGRETS THE HASTY RELEASE OF THE REPORT.</p>	
<p>WE BELIEVE THAT THE IAEA REPORT SHOULD NOT BE THE "SHIELD" OR "GREENLIGHT" FOR JAPAN'S DISCHARGE OF NUCLEAR-CONTAMINATED WATER INTO THE OCEAN.</p> <p>DUE TO ITS LIMITED MANDATE, THE IAEA FAILED TO REVIEW THE JUSTIFICATION AND LEGITIMACY OF JAPAN'S OCEAN DISCHARGE PLAN, ASSESS THE LONG-TERM EFFECTIVENESS OF JAPAN'S PURIFICATION FACILITY AND CORROBORATE THE AUTHENTICITY AND ACCURACY OF JAPAN'S NUCLEAR-CONTAMINATED WATER DATA. THEREFORE THE CONCLUSION IS LARGELY LIMITED AND INCOMPLETE.</p> <p>WE NOTED THAT DIRECTOR GENERAL RAFAEL MARIANO GROSS STATED THAT THE IAEA CONDUCTED THE REVIEW AT THE REQUEST OF THE JAPANESE GOVERNMENT AND THE REPORT IS NEITHER A RECOMMENDATION NOR AN ENDORSEMENT OF JAPAN'S OCEAN DISCHARGE POLICY.</p>	<p>SIMPLY FOR SAVING COST, JAPAN HAS INSISTED ON DISCHARGING THE NUCLEAR-CONTAMINATED WATER INTO THE SEA IN DISREGARD OF THE CONCERNS AND OPPOSITION FROM THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND TAKEN THE PACIFIC OCEAN AS THE "SEWER".</p> <p>NO MATTER WHAT THE REPORT SAYS, IT WILL NOT CHANGE THE FACT THAT JAPAN WILL RELEASE MILLIONS OF TONNES OF FUKUSHIMA NUCLEAR-CONTAMINATED WATER INTO THE PACIFIC OCEAN IN THE NEXT THREE DECADES. WILL JAPAN'S PURIFICATION FACILITY BE EFFECTIVE IN THE LONG-TERM? CAN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY BE TIMELY INFORMED WHEN THE DISCHARGED WATER EXCEEDS THE DISCHARGE LIMIT? WHAT IMPACT WILL THE LONG TERM ACCUMULATION AND CONCENTRATION OF RADIONUCLIDES BRING TO THE MARINE ENVIRONMENT, FOOD SAFETY AND PEOPLE'S HEALTH? THESE ARE THE QUESTIONS THAT THE IAEA REPORT FAILED TO ANSWER.</p>	<p>TWELVE YEARS AGO, JAPAN RECEIVED SUPPORTS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD IN THE WAKE OF THE FUKUSHIMA NUCLEAR ACCIDENT. TWELVE YEARS ON, JAPAN HAS CHOSEN TO SHIFT THE RISK OF NUCLEAR CONTAMINATION ONTO THE WHOLE HUMANITY.</p> <p>THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE LAW OF THE SEA (UNCLOS) STIPULATES THAT STATES HAVE THE OBLIGATION TO PROTECT AND PRESERVE THE MARINE ENVIRONMENT, AND THE CONVENTION ON THE PREVENTION OF MARINE POLLUTION BY DUMPING OF WASTES AND OTHER MATTER IN 1972 PROHIBITS THE DUMPING OF ALL RADIOACTIVE WASTES INTO THE OCEAN FROM MAN-MADE STRUCTURES AT SEA. WHAT JAPAN DOES CONTRAVENES ITS INTERNATIONAL MORAL RESPONSIBILITY AND OBLIGATIONS UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW.</p>

Embassy of China in Indonesia

Government Organization

Send message

Source:

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/.../202307/t20230704_11107562.html

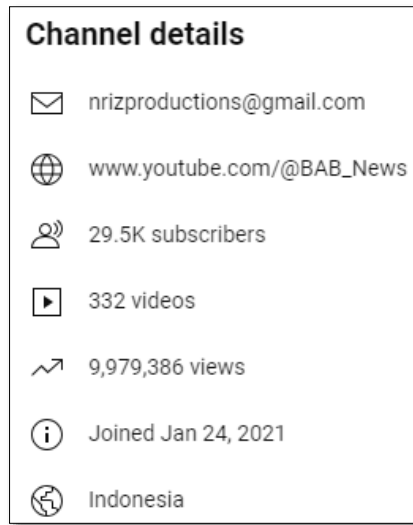
#IAEA #radioactive #Jepang #kimia #china #RadioactiveWaste #chinaembassy #embassyofchina #chinaembassyjakarta #explorepage #explore #KedutaanTiongkokIndonesia #viral #trending #diplomacy #mfachina #chinanews #chinainfo #ForeignMinistry

Inauthentic Coordinated Behavior

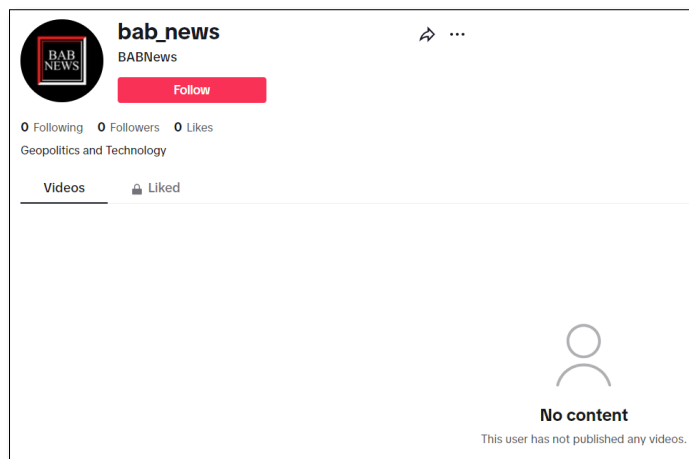
We detected an ongoing inauthentic coordinated behavior promoting pro-China and anti-US content in YouTube videos, narrated in Bahasa Indonesia. The YouTube channel @BAB_News

¹²<https://www.facebook.com/ChineseEmbassyinIndonesia/posts/pfbid02uxBrBhLjek9JHPu2fDQe72QtdUVCyqqYhZx8cSmsRqzs8EgBf2pip1XVQyM8sN9HI>

is named “ASAL BACOT”, likely imitating a legitimate online podcast with the same name. The channel was opened in January 2021, and has more than 300 videos, more than 29,500 subscribers, and more than 9 million views, as can be seen below¹³:



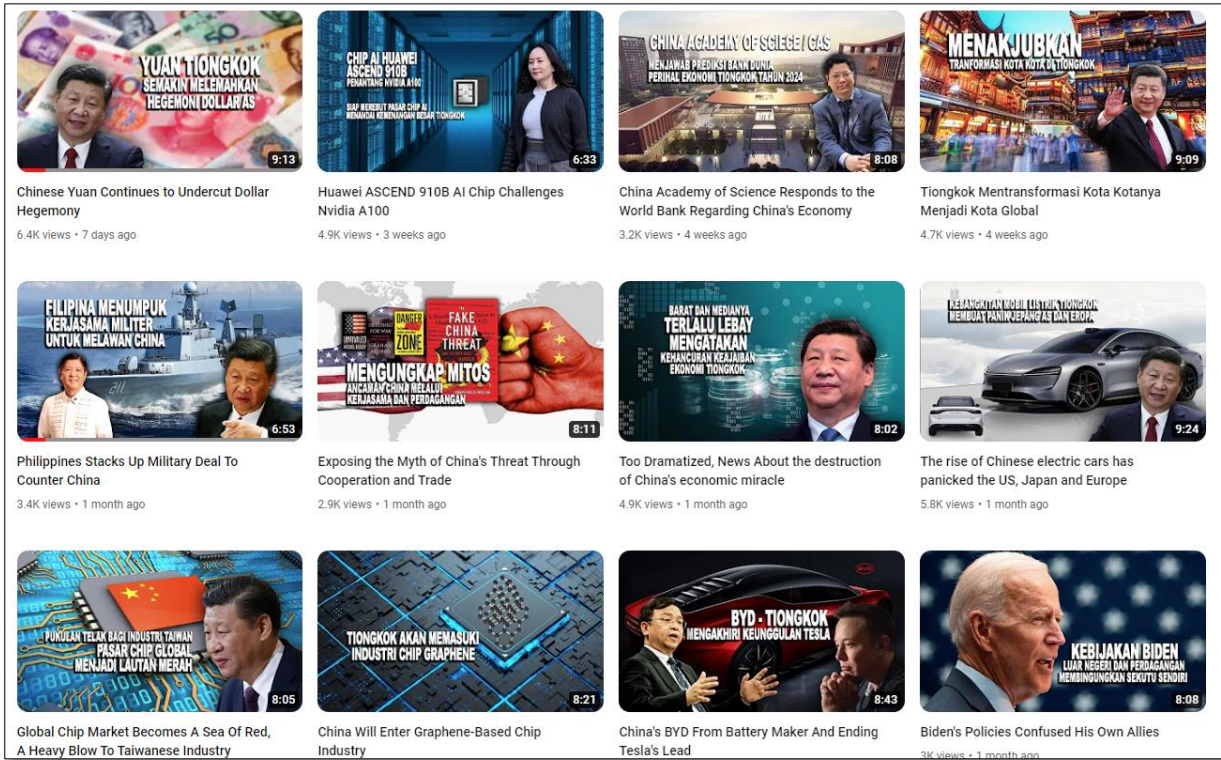
The channel has a TikTok account as well¹⁴, but no content was uploaded to it:



The videos’ titles and descriptions are in English, but the voice narrating the embedded subtitles are in Bahasa Indonesia, and the videos are composed of snippets taken from different sources like news reports and stock footage.

¹³ https://www.youtube.com/@BAB_News/videos

¹⁴ https://www.tiktok.com/@BAB_News?lang=en



These characteristics were also found in similar networks of YouTube channels propagating pro-China content, which also utilized AI technology to create and narrate content, as reported by the New York Times¹⁵ and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI)¹⁶.

In addition, this inauthentic YouTube channel posted content targeting Japan, with similar narratives to those promoted by Chinese sources, in Bahasa Indonesia. The content included calling Japan a pawn of the US, implying that Japan aims to dominate Asia, and criticizing Japan's ALPS-treated water plan:

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/14/business/media/pro-china-youtube-disinformation.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

¹⁶ <https://www.aspi.org.au/index.php/report/shadow-play>



Japan Dumps Nuclear Waste Into The Ocean, As If It's Its Private Sewer

BAB News • 5.2K views • 7 months ago
 contact : nrizproductions@gmail.com



JAPAN's Ambition To Return to Dominate Asia

BAB News • 4K views • 1 year ago
 Japan's interaction with NATO and blatant participation in the US-led military alliance has undermined peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, this is certainly a cause for special...



How the US Trapped the Japanese Economy

BAB News • 6.9K views • 1 month ago
 contact : nrizproductions@gmail.com



Japan Becomes US Pawn

BAB News • 3.5K views • 1 year ago
 Japan, has neglected regional peace and security for playing a disgraceful role as Washington's pawn. Acting as Washington's "right hand man" in the Asia-Pacific region, the Japanese government...



China Japan Relations in the Future

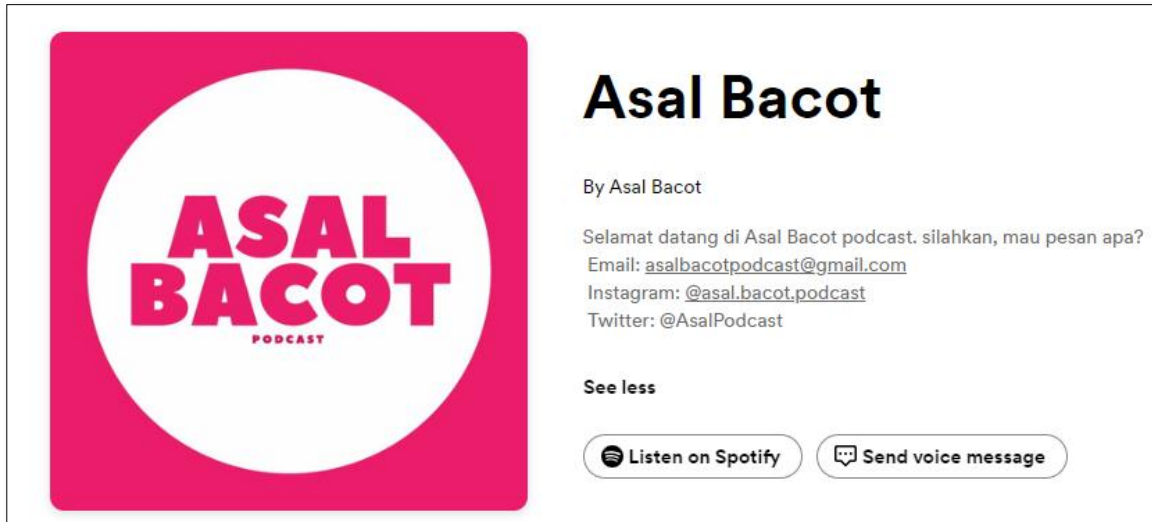
ASAL BACOT
 29.5K subscribers Subscribe

9,437 views Dec 11, 2023
 contact : nrizproductions@gmail.com

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¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wphNT8xKTek>

We identified the authentic “Asal Bacot” online entity, whose name was stolen and used by the YouTube channel @BAB_news. The legitimate “Asal Bacot” entity does not have a YouTube channel and has a different email address and different social media accounts:



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¹⁸ <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/asal-bacot>

Additional Chinese Influence

Indonesia is strategically important to China, so China employs the economic influence channel extensively by incorporating Indonesia in BRI projects such as the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway. In October 2023, during the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, President Xi met with Indonesia's then-President Widodo. China then expressed it wanted to expand cooperation in "emerging industries such as the digital economy", and to boost its imports of Indonesian agricultural and fishery products¹⁹. In response, Widodo said that his country regards China as an important strategic partner in national economic development and "looks forward to further strengthening communication and cooperation with China".²⁰ China is Indonesia's largest trading partner and in the first half of 2022 it invested 3.6 billion USD in foreign direct investment, and Chinese Premier Li Qiang committed 21.7 billion USD in new investment when he visited Jakarta last September.²¹

However, like other Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia disputes China's claim to most of the South China Sea, including part of Indonesia's internationally recognized exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Nevertheless, there were no confrontations between China and Indonesia, unlike those between the Philippines or Vietnam and China. Indonesia even approved a development plan for the offshore gas field which is located in the South China Sea²², and hosted large military drills with the US, Australia, Japan, Singapore, France, and the UK, in an attempt to balance China's activities in the South China Sea²³.

According to the China Index by Doublethink Lab organization, a civil society organization dedicated to studying the malign influence of digital authoritarianism, Indonesia was the sixteenth most influenced country by China across nine different fields²⁴.

The fields include media, academia, economy, society, military, law enforcement, technology, domestic politics, and foreign policy. Overall scores are determined by totaling the equally weighted responses from all the indicators.²⁵

¹⁹ <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/indonesia-china-vow-to-expand-economic-cooperation/>

²⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/chinas-xi-wants-expand-cooperation-with-indonesia-several-key-markets-2023-10-17/>

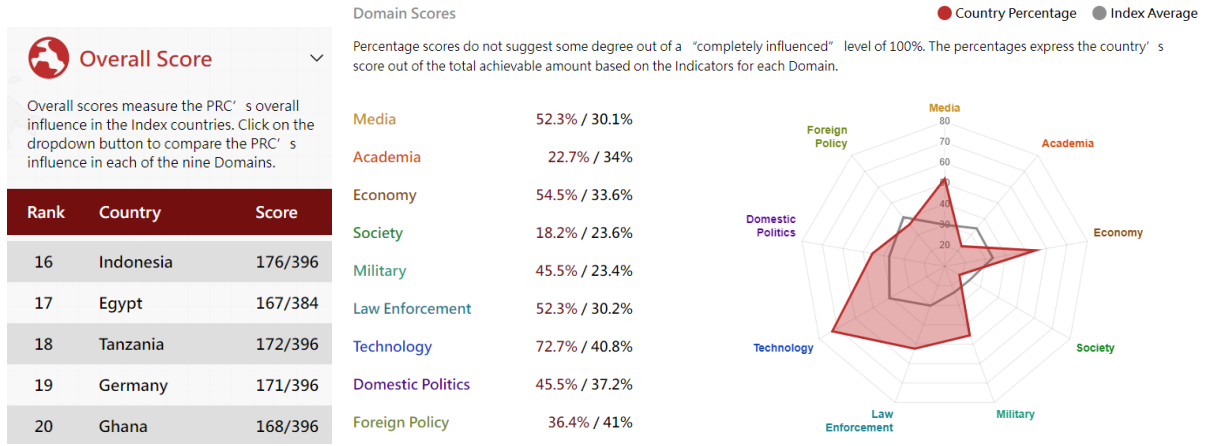
²¹ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3252231/china-not-expected-let-past-overshadow-relations-indonesias-new-leader-prabowo-subianto>

²² <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/indonesia-approves-3-bln-development-plan-south-china-sea-gas-block-2023-01-02/>

²³ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2023/09/02/indonesia-hosts-largest-military-drills-with-us-allies-as-south-china-sea-tension-grows.html>

²⁴ <https://china-index.io/country/Indonesia>

²⁵ <https://china-infdex.io/about>



As can be seen in the graph, the technology and economy fields in Indonesia were very influenced by China. Key instances:

- There are media organizations in Indonesia that belong to the World Chinese Media (世界华文媒体) network.
- There are journalists, media organizations, or online influencers who have attended all-expenses-paid media tours in China.
- Indonesia imports (or receives in-kind donations of) military or law-enforcement equipment or components of equipment from China.
- China-connected entities (such as China Mobile, China Unicom, or China Telecom) or their subsidiaries provide telecom services in Indonesia.
- Telecoms have signed agreements to adopt hardware or technical specifications of 4G or 5G cellular networks that are produced or developed by Huawei, ZTE, or other Chinese enterprises.
- China-connected entities are authorized vendors to supply tech-related equipment or services to the Indonesian government, military, or security services.
- Indonesian companies have publicly announced that they had signed MOUs to collaborate on technological development (such as collaborations in AI, Blockchain, Cloud Computing, and Big Data) with China-connected entities.
- TikTok is one of the top five popular social media or messaging apps, based on usage, in Indonesia. TikTok is a China-connected entity.
- China-related entities own, operate or substantially control critical infrastructure (e.g. ports, power plants, digital data centers, etc.) or sensitive sectors (biotech, raw materials, etc.).



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