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# Philippines

## Chinese Digital Influence in Southeast Asia



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# Introduction

## Executive Summary

In the third part of our ongoing series on Chinese digital influence in Southeast Asia our focus is on the Philippines. The aim of this paper is to create a foundation on which more detailed research can be conducted as specific case studies. With increasing tensions between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea more research is urgently needed on Chinese influence operations targeting both the Philippines and the discourse around the South China Sea conflict.

## Key Findings

- Members of the Chinese Embassy actively use their social media accounts to spread Chinese narratives in the Philippine information space.
- Official accounts are amplified by inauthentic accounts.
- There are examples of inauthentic coordinated behavior in the Philippines.
- The inauthentic pro-Chinese entity “Asia Today” is pushing out Chinese narratives around the South China Sea conflict.

## Historical Background

Following its independence in 1946, the Philippines established diplomatic ties with the Republic of China and maintained them even after the nationalist government relocated to Taiwan in 1949. It wasn't until 1975 that the Philippines formally recognized the People's Republic of China and normalized diplomatic relations. Over the ensuing decades, the two countries engaged in numerous high-level visits and bilateral agreements focused on trade and cultural exchange, fostering what appeared to be a growing friendship.

However, the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff marked a significant downturn in their relationship. Following the standoff, there were anti-Chinese protests in the Philippines and counter-protests in China, along with calls for boycotts of Chinese products and stricter regulations on the import of Philippine goods into China. In recent years, the Philippines has increasingly been embroiled in the contentious conflict over the South China Sea.

China's claim to sovereignty over more than 90% of the South China Sea, as delineated by the nine-dash line, includes disputed areas such as Scarborough and Thomas Shoals. Despite a landmark victory for the Philippines in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, which ruled against China's expansive territorial claims, China has refused to acknowledge the ruling. Instead, China has deployed numerous coastguard vessels to the region and established a fleet of fishing trawlers that function more like a maritime militia. With the world's largest navy at its disposal, China has become increasingly assertive in using its military power to enforce its territorial claims.

Nevertheless, as an article published by VOA points out, the Philippines are far from standing down.<sup>1</sup> As of 2024 the Philippine coastguard has committed to maintaining a presence around the Sabina shoal, where it has accused China of land reclamation. The Sabina shoal is used as a rendezvous point by the Philippine army to resupply its troops stationed on the grounded warship at the second Thomas Shoal.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Philippine coast guard will block China reclamation at disputed shoal, official says \(voanews.com\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Philippine coast guard will block China reclamation at disputed shoal, official says \(voanews.com\)](#)

## Online Influence

Filipinos reportedly spend more time online and on social media than users anywhere else in the world, and an estimated 87% of news consumers in the country turned to online sources in 2021. Facebook, X, and YouTube were the most used platforms for news and public conversation, and influencers on these platforms played a significant role in the country's media environment. TikTok is increasingly in use as well as a source of news.<sup>3</sup> This and the fact that many of the social media users in the Philippines have high English literacy make the Philippines an ideal target for online influence operations.<sup>4</sup>

The Chinese online influence efforts, official and unofficial, utilize these social media platforms, domains, and additional media channels. China's foreign policy has become more assertive and proactive, using social media as a primary means of public diplomacy. The main narratives pushed are a mix of positive promotion of China, its agenda regarding different subjects, and counter-narratives against criticism. In the Philippines, there is a focus on the contentious South China Sea issue, and on the Philippines' government relations with the USA. Moreover, Chinese state media, which is producing and disseminating the mentioned narratives, is available in English and Filipino (a standardized version of Tagalog).

### Key findings of Chinese online influence:

- **Inauthentic Coordinated Behavior:** In September 2020, Facebook took down a pro-China network, with origins in China, that used inauthentic coordinated accounts, pages, and groups, on Instagram, X (then Twitter), and Facebook. The involved accounts posted about a range of issues in Chinese, English, Filipino, and Indonesian. Still, they showed a particular interest in maritime security in the South China Sea and the political scene in the country. The Philippines-related cluster of inauthentic accounts began in March 2018 and grew through 2019 and into 2020. This cluster was the most engaged out of the clusters of inauthentic accounts and consisted of dozens of accounts.<sup>5</sup>

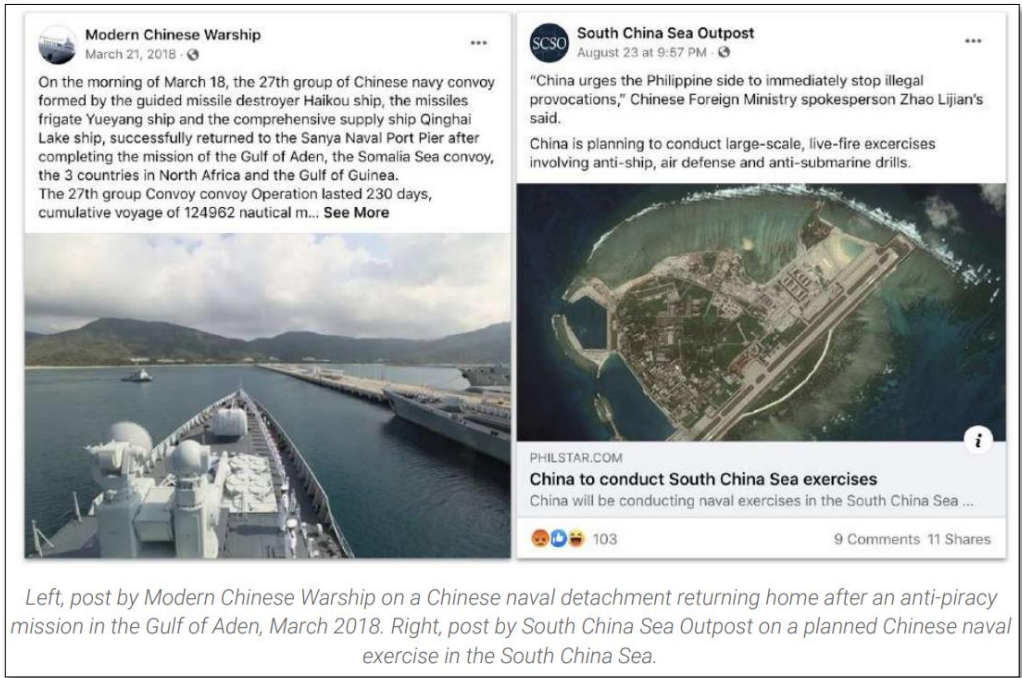
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<sup>3</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/philippines/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>

<sup>4</sup> <https://jamestown.org/program/prc-influence-operations-in-the-philippines-can-beijing-flip-the-south-china-sea-script/>

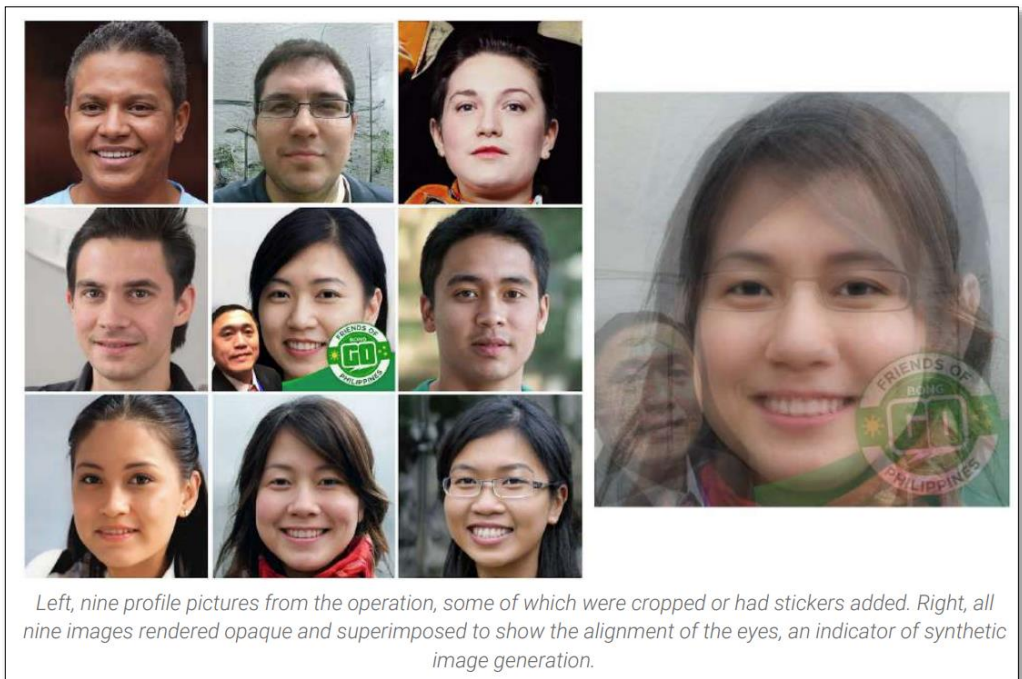
<sup>5</sup> <https://graphika.com/reports/operation-naval-gazing>

Example posts:



6

This campaign utilized several techniques to disguise its inauthenticity. Some accounts stole their profile picture from authentic accounts and others used AI-generated profile pictures. See examples of AI-generated pictures used by the inauthentic accounts network:



7

- **Online diplomatic communication:** China’s ambassador to the Philippines, similarly to Chinese diplomats in other countries, uses social media to regularly post and engage with

<sup>6</sup> <https://graphika.com/reports/operation-naval-gazing>

<sup>7</sup> <https://graphika.com/reports/operation-naval-gazing>

other accounts. The official accounts for the ambassador and the embassy have hundreds of thousands of followers on Facebook<sup>8,9</sup>, and more than 16,000 on X<sup>10</sup>.



In addition, the official accounts' activity on social media is often amplified by inauthentic accounts, as seen below in the bot-rate reposts:

**POST DATA**

Potential Human Reach	11,000
Post Views	284
Amplification Multiplier	2.5x
Bot-Like Reposts	100%
Total Interactions	6
Total Reposts	1
Likes	5
Poster	Chinaembmanila (ChineseEmbassyManila)

Therefore, it seems as if a substantial number of the accounts following and engaging with the Chinese official accounts are inauthentic.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/AmbHuangXilian/>  
<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaEmbassyManila>  
<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/chinaembmanila>

- **Fake media sources:** Inauthentic social media entities claiming to be news sources were identified as propagating pro-China messages on their different social media accounts. They actively shared these messages into specific Philippines-related Facebook groups, in an effort to reach Filipino audiences.
- **Media cooperation agreements:** Chinese state media established formal media cooperation agreements with state broadcaster People’s Television Network and major pro-government Philippine dailies like the Manila Bulletin and the Manila Times. The Philippine Star and Philippine Daily Inquirer also published articles from Chinese state media.<sup>11</sup> See an example article from the Chinese Xinhua news agency in The Manila Times:



12

- **Subsidized press trips:** on different occasions, Filipino media officials and journalists visited China to learn about “new media development” and an alternative form of journalism and management called “socialist journalism with Chinese characteristics”. The Philippines-based news source Rappler reported in 2021 that at least 3 staff members of the Presidential Communications Operations Office and the state-owned Philippine News Agency spent nearly a year in China, on different occasions. Participants of the trips acknowledged they had developed a favorable view of China.<sup>13</sup>
- **Control over content-dissemination infrastructure:** several China-based companies with connections to the CCP are involved in the Philippines' information infrastructure. For example, as of December 2021 equipment for the Philippines 5G wireless networks was still mostly supplied by the China-based company Huawei, which has a record of building censorship and surveillance systems. Some companies in the Philippines began voluntarily switching to other suppliers, but the government did not provide incentives as of August 2022.<sup>14,15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> [https://freedomhouse.org/country/philippines/beijings-global-media-influence/2022#footnote11\\_6skat3s](https://freedomhouse.org/country/philippines/beijings-global-media-influence/2022#footnote11_6skat3s)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.manilatimes.net/2024/01/03/business/foreign-business/world-economy-can-benefit-from-china-development/1926483>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/philippines-cambodia-struggle-press-freedom-china-amps-influence/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/5g-geopolitics-and-philippines-huawei-controversy>

<sup>15</sup> [https://freedomhouse.org/country/philippines/beijings-global-media-influence/2022#footnote43\\_hl7cgwt](https://freedomhouse.org/country/philippines/beijings-global-media-influence/2022#footnote43_hl7cgwt)

## The South China Sea Issue and the Philippines

In January 2023, the Philippines' President Marcos Jr. visited China and established a direct line of communication between the capitals of the two countries. This hotline would be between departments in each country's foreign affairs ministries that deal with maritime and border issues. The objective was to prevent the escalation of tension in the South China Sea. Even though this measure was boasted of as a confidence-building measure and a diplomatic win for the Philippines, it could also serve as an indicator of the sensitive position of the current China-Philippines relations.<sup>16</sup>

The hotline was put to the test on August 5, 2023, when the Chinese Coast Guard fired water cannons at Philippine boats that were on a resupply mission within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ)<sup>17</sup>. However, according to a Philippine government representative, efforts to contact the Chinese during this crisis, using this hotline and other means, failed because the Chinese side did not answer.<sup>18</sup>

As mentioned before, soon after China published its new standard map on August 28, 2023, which added another dash-line to its claim, the Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) issued a statement rejecting this map. It said that China's efforts to legitimize its jurisdiction over the area that the Philippines consider the West Philippine Sea had no basis under international law. The DFA also filed a diplomatic protest rejecting the map and calling for a peaceful resolution of the issue.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, on December 10, 2023, there was another maritime incident, as the Philippines and China accused each other of a collision of their vessels near the disputed shoal in the South China Sea. The Philippine coastguard accused China of firing water cannons and ramming resupply vessels and a coastguard ship, while China's coastguard said the Philippine vessel intentionally rammed its ship.<sup>20,21</sup>

In terms of China's online influence efforts that deal specifically with the South China Sea, it is clear that the entire range of capabilities was utilized. In accordance with China's influence methods, inauthentic online accounts, pages, and other online entities echoed the messages broadcasted by China's state media and other Chinese officials.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/10/amid-china-tensions-philippines-relies-alliances-and-rule-law>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/06/philippines-accuses-china-of-water-cannon-attack-in-spratly-islands>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/10/amid-china-tensions-philippines-relies-alliances-and-rule-law>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/10/amid-china-tensions-philippines-relies-alliances-and-rule-law>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-says-china-rammed-water-cannon-resupply-vessels-2023-12-10/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/chinese-coast-guard-blasts-philippine-boats-with-water-cannons-f6908d61>



For example, the Chinese state media echoed the government’s claims to the islets in the region on December 15, 2023<sup>22</sup>:



A recent example of an inauthentic pro-China online entity, that echoed the same messages is the online entity “Asia Today”, which claims to be a news and media source focusing on the Philippines. However, there is no official website and no information regarding the operators of this entity, only a Facebook page and a TikTok account.<sup>23,24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/NewsContent.CCTVPLUS/videos/6963447837042712/>

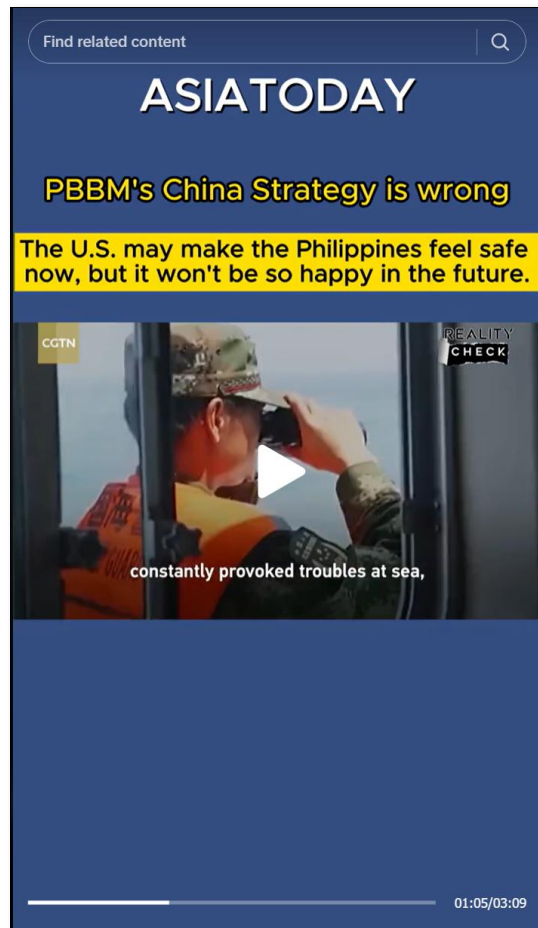
<sup>23</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@asiatoday111>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100095111886095>

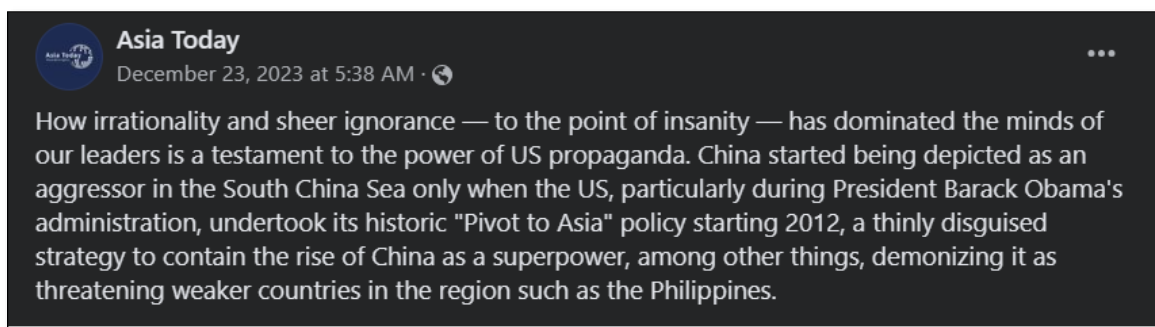


might indicate that the person operating the accounts knows Chinese. In addition, the name “Asia Today” is also the name of a program broadcasted by CGTN.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, the “Asia Today” accounts posted several times about the maritime clashes between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea. The related posts included pro-China messages and warnings that the Philippines should not side with the USA:



26



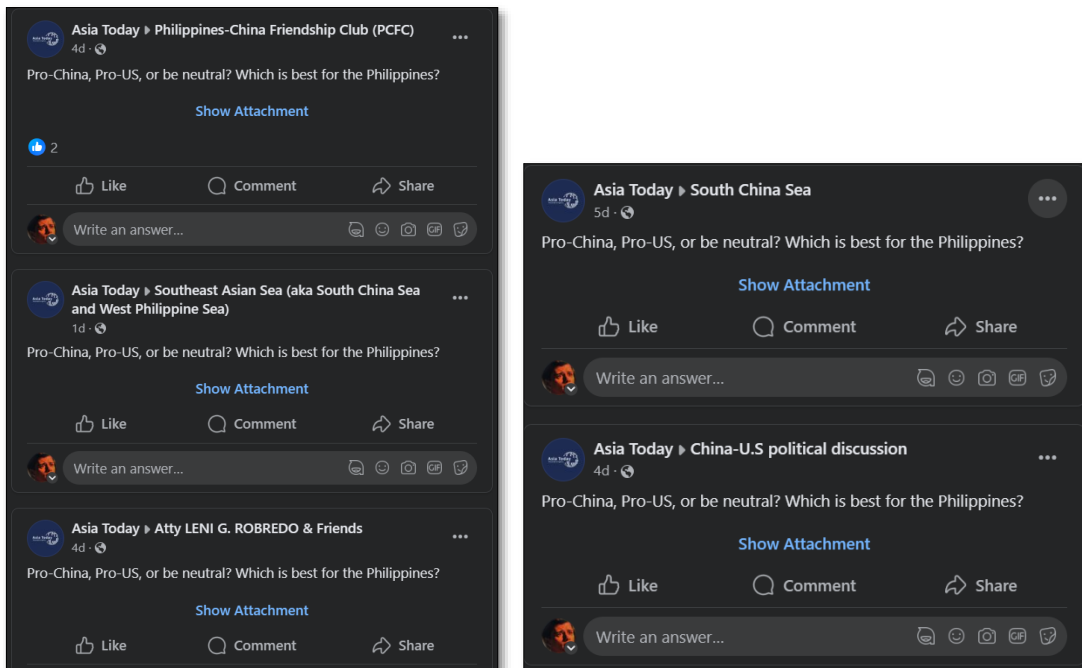
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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.cgtn.com/channel/english/program-list.html>

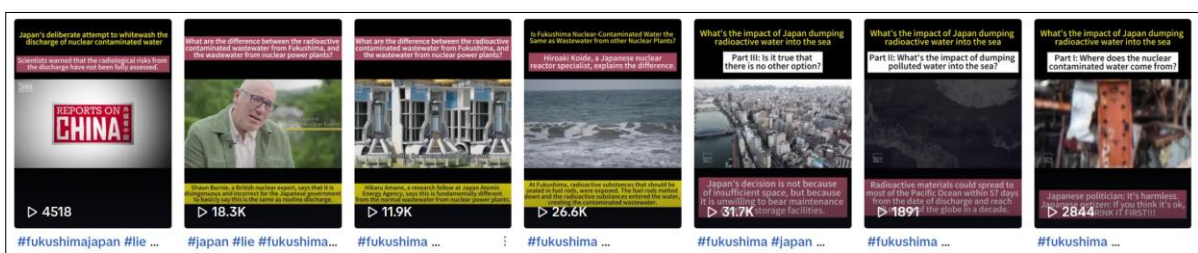
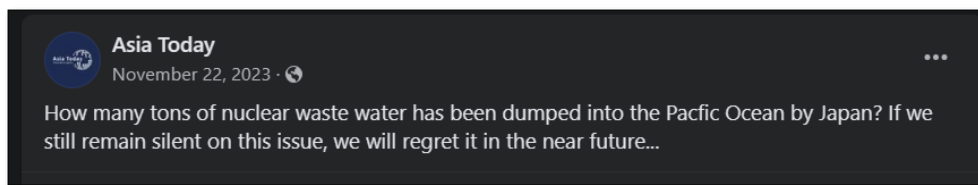
<sup>26</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@asiatoday111/video/7317209438002187525>

<sup>27</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0bYkKse4BWS46ZvFFEv7RdBBH8Wh4RsHoTrms2Ri3V5fNKFwgqjGyxMet8dapwZl&id=100095111886095](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0bYkKse4BWS46ZvFFEv7RdBBH8Wh4RsHoTrms2Ri3V5fNKFwgqjGyxMet8dapwZl&id=100095111886095)

The “Asia Today” Facebook page is actively sharing this content in Philippines-related Facebook groups and pages. This is a clear effort to influence the Philippine online users, by trying to reach as many of them as possible on Facebook:



The “Asia Today” also posted content regarding other issues, that echoed China’s agenda, like criticism of Japan’s ALPS-treated water release plan:



This is one example of inauthentic influence efforts targeting an ASEAN member, the Philippines, in a clear effort to promote China’s strategic goals in the region. It is likely that additional online influence efforts are underway, and they will likely increase as tensions in the region continue to grow.

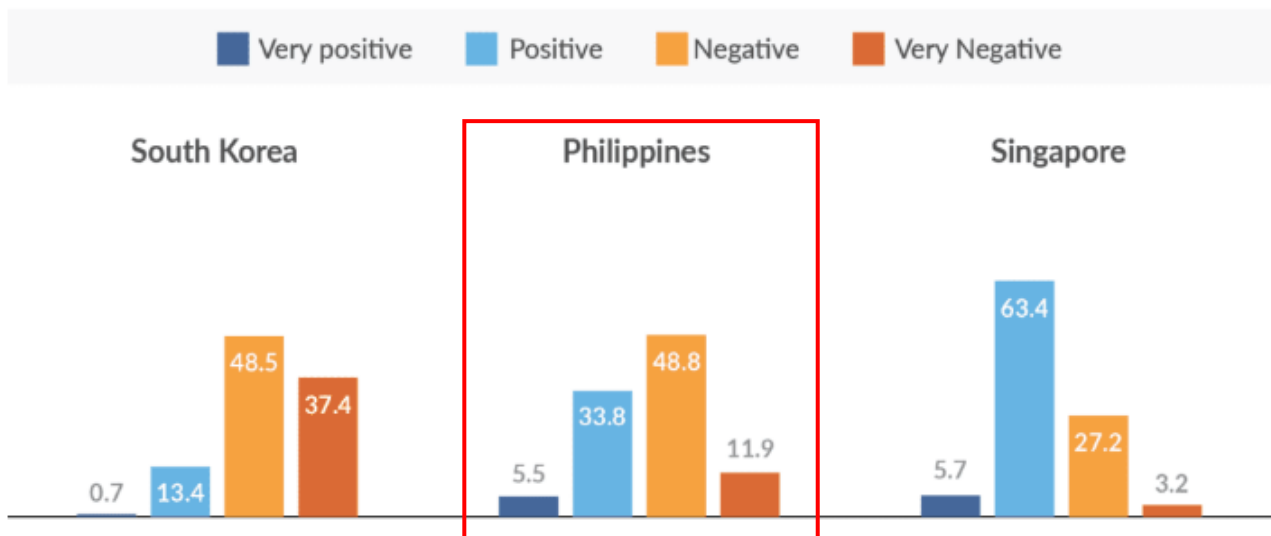
## Economic and Military Influence

Philippines-China relations have in recent years been dominated by the territorial dispute in the South China Sea, which in the Philippines, is called the West Philippine Sea. The situation escalated since the naval standoff between the two countries over the Scarborough Shoal in April 2012. Bilateral relations took a downturn when the Philippine government filed an arbitration case against China under the United National Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 2013, over the Chinese nine-dash line claim.<sup>28</sup> In addition, since taking office in mid-2022, President Marcos Jr is trying to deepen ties with the USA, departing from his predecessor’s pro-China stance.

A survey conducted by the New York-based Eurasia Group Foundation in 2023 polled 1,500 adults from Singapore, South Korea, and the Philippines, all countries with significant ties with both the USA and China. The poll found that 48.8% of the Filipino respondents viewed China’s influence over the Philippines in the last five years as negative.<sup>29</sup>

### Views on Chinese influence by country

% of people who selected \_\_\_\_\_ in response to “In the past five years, China’s influence in my country has been \_\_\_\_\_.”



Source: EGF

Nevertheless, despite the increasing tensions surrounding the territorial dispute, China was the Philippines' third-largest export market in 2022, behind only the USA and Japan. China is also the largest source of imports, mainly electronics and machinery.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, according to

<sup>28</sup> <https://fsi.gov.ph/philippines-china-relations-beyond-the-territorial-disputes/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://instituteforglobalaffairs.org/2023/06/modeling-democracy-caught-in-the-middle/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/how-far-could-china-philippines-relations-worsen-2023-12-21/>

the China Index by Doublethink Lab organization<sup>31</sup>, in 2021 the Philippines was the seventh most influenced country by China across nine different fields<sup>32</sup>. The fields include media,

Ranking & Scores →		
Overall Score		
Overall scores measure the PRC's overall influence in the Index countries. Click on the dropdown button to compare the PRC's influence in each of the nine Domains.		
Rank	Country	Score
7	Philippines	204/380
8	Kyrgyzstan	206/384
9	Tajikistan	194/396
10	Malaysia	189/388
11	Taiwan	182/380

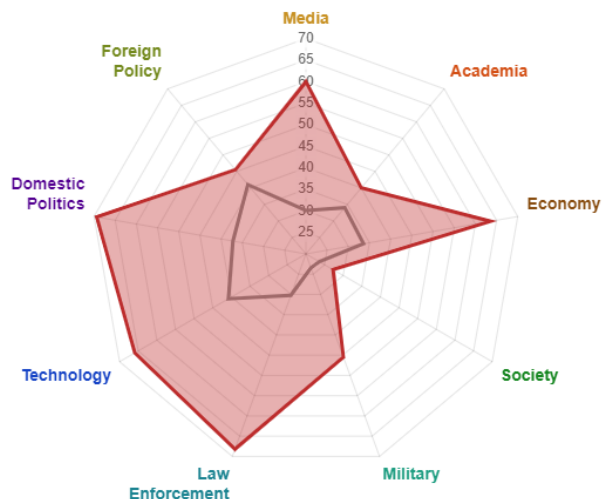
academia, economy, society, military, law enforcement, technology, domestic politics, and foreign policy. Local experts provided documentary evidence when answering for the positive existence of influence phenomena in the different fields. Overall scores are determined by totaling the equally weighted responses from all the indicators.<sup>33</sup>

**Domain Scores**

● Country Percentage ● Index Average

Percentage scores do not suggest some degree out of a "completely influenced" level of 100%. The percentages express the country's score out of the total achievable amount based on the Indicators for each Domain.

Media	60.0% / 30.1%
Academia	40.0% / 34%
Economy	63.6% / 33.6%
Society	27.3% / 23.6%
Military	45.5% / 23.4%
Law Enforcement	68.2% / 30.2%
Technology	65.9% / 40.8%
Domestic Politics	69.4% / 37.2%
Foreign Policy	45.5% / 41%



<sup>31</sup> A civil society organization dedicated to studying the malign influence of digital authoritarianism.

<sup>32</sup> <https://china-index.io/country/Philippines>

<sup>33</sup> <https://china-infdex.io/about>

As can be seen in the graph, Chinese influence in the Philippines in the fields of law enforcement, technology, and domestic policies, is significant. Key instances of Chinese influence in these fields, taken from the China Index 2022<sup>34</sup>:

- There are reports of cyber-attacks targeting government, critical infrastructure, or enterprises that were suspected to be initiated from China.
- There are reports of economic espionage targeting the private sector that were suspected to benefit China-connected entities.
- The Philippine government has deployed video or internet surveillance systems from China for law enforcement.
- China-connected entities (such as China Mobile, China Unicom, or China Telecom) or their subsidiaries provide telecom services.
- Telecoms have signed agreements in the Philippines 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 Philippine government, military or security services.
- Central or local governments have collaborated (such as data collection or exchange agreement, or adoption of related hardware) with the Chinese government or China-connected entities on facial, voice recognition, or other applications involving biometrics achieved by AI.
- Companies have publicly announced that they had signed Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) to collaborate on technological development (such as collaborations in AI, Blockchain, Cloud Computing, and Big Data) with China-connected entities.
- Politicians or government employees at the sub-national level are signing agreements with the Chinese government or Chinese state-owned enterprises.
- Politicians or government employees have taken trips to China, paid for by China-connected individuals or entities.
- Law enforcement and judicial-related training offered by China-connected individuals or entities has been accepted by national or subnational governments.

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<sup>34</sup> <https://china-index.io/country/Philippines>



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