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Vietnam

Chinese Digital Influence in Southeast Asia



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Introduction

Executive Summary

In the last decades Southeast Asia has increasingly become a playground for world powers, namely China and the USA, fighting over influence in the region. The “State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey Report” garnered significant attention as it showcased that if respondents were forced to align with the USA and China, 50.5 % would choose China. While this showed a significant increase in the influence China has in the region the same survey showed that 50.1% of respondents answered they distrust China while only 37.6% distrust the USA.¹ While this may seem paradoxical it only highlights the complexity and the dynamism the fight over influence in the region has.

China’s situation in Southeast Asia, Oceania, and India differs from country to country, as several countries in the region are either allies of the USA or more aligned with China. Many of them actively try to maintain a balanced position in an effort to benefit from both highly influential super-powers. Therefore, China employs the economic, diplomatic, and online influence channels across the many countries in its close region as it sees fit, in order to advance China’s regional stance. Moreover, territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) and across the Himalayan border involve the Chinese military kinetic activity in addition to the economic and online influence channels.

In this ongoing series we will cover several countries and regional conflicts out of the perspective of digital influence. The aim is to create a foundation on which more detailed research can be conducted as specific case studies. The main focus is on Chinese Influence.

Key findings

- Most countries we examined were targeted by coordinated inauthentic digital behavior that propagated pro-China content. In Vietnam, we identified a surge in inauthentic digital activity propagating positive messages about the China-Vietnam relationship prior to and during a high-profile visit of President Xi Jinping.
- Social media accounts of Chinese embassies and officials across most of the countries in the region were found to actively promote pro-China content. Chinese official activity on social media was identified in all the examined countries. The official accounts propagate and amplify pro-China content, in Chinese, English, and often in local languages. Chinese state media sources utilize social media as well, to target local audiences with content in English, Chinese, and local languages. In many cases, the social media activity of both Chinese official accounts and Chinese state media is amplified by inauthentic accounts².
- Countries that were perceived as relatively close to China in the region, such as Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei, were less targeted by coordinated inauthentic behavior. We identified sporadic inauthentic accounts promoting pro-China content targeting online

¹ [The-State-of-SEA-2024.pdf \(iseas.edu.sg\)](#)

² Comments, shares, or reposts, and interactions are considered amplification of content on social media.

audiences in the Pacific Islands, but no indications of extensive coordinated inauthentic behavior.

Historical Overview

The Chinese-Vietnamese relations go back at least 2 millennia and are both defined by intense conflict and struggle for independence but also by deep cultural and economic exchange. In 111BCE the region of what is known as northern Vietnam were conquered and annexed into the Han Dynasty, ushering in centuries of Chinese dominance. During this time many elements of Chinese governance, bureaucracy, philosophy, and religion such as Confucianism and Daoism were adopted. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese fiercely maintained their cultural identity and languages, frequently rebelling against Chinese rule. The Chinese Tang Dynasty (618-907) was another period of intense cultural and economic exchange, most notably the introduction of Buddhism to Vietnam. With the end of the Tang Dynasty in 907 the control of China over Vietnam began to slip, leading to Vietnamese independence in 938. Although China made several attempts of regaining power over the region, it never managed to make any significant inroads again. Fast tracking to the 20th century, as a communist ally, China officially supported Vietnam's struggle for independence, although it can be argued that it was not always the most reliable of allies. In 1979 China launched a surprise attack on Vietnam in what is known as the Sino-Vietnamese war. Until the normalization of relations in 1991 it came to several armed conflicts between the 2 countries such as the Battles of Fakashan (1981) and Xi Xuyên (1984) and the Johnson South Reef Skirmish (1988).

Online Influence

China’s efforts to influence the online realm in Vietnam include several features, in accordance with China’s influence methodology. Several Chinese state media sources are producing Vietnamese-language news content, like China Radio International and China’s official news agency, Xinhua. In 2019, a Vietnamese official met with then Xinhua’s Vice President and agreed to enhance the cooperation between the two state media agencies, Vietnam News Agency (VNA) and Xinhua:

On information sharing, he said Xinhua’s news, especially in English and Chinese, provided an important source of international news for VNA, especially those regarding China and Northeast Asia.

The host suggested that both sides should increase information sharing and fight negative news about their respective countries’ situations, especially distorted and reactionary news that aimed to divide the two nations.

As national news agencies, Xinhua and VNA should carry more positive news about the other country, thus strengthening public trust in the political system and protecting the ideological foundation and the path to socialism in each country, he said.

3

However, according to research by the Center for Naval Analysis from 2020, a nonprofit research organization from the USA, there are no substantial content-sharing agreements with Vietnamese news sources. A different avenue for influencing the Vietnamese media is Chinese forums and training programs for journalists and reporters from Vietnam. Yet, the level of participation appears to be lower than that of participants from other countries in the region⁴.

The narratives that China is trying to promote in Vietnam include:

- China and Vietnam have a shared heritage.
- China is willing to set aside differences with Vietnam and pursue greater cooperation.
- China is a more responsible and constructive international actor than the USA, including in the fight against COVID-19.

³ <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/536959/xinhua-to-expand-cooperation-with-vietnam-news-agency.html#ugZhdpVzUi3YLBXL.97>

⁴ <https://www.cna.org/reports/2020/09/chinese-information-shaping-in-vietnam>

Posts by Chinese official accounts promoting some of the mentioned narratives, for example⁵, 6, 7, 8:



China’s state media source, CGTN, operates a Facebook page in Vietnamese with more than 2 million followers. See for example a misleading post claiming that US bioweapon labs exist

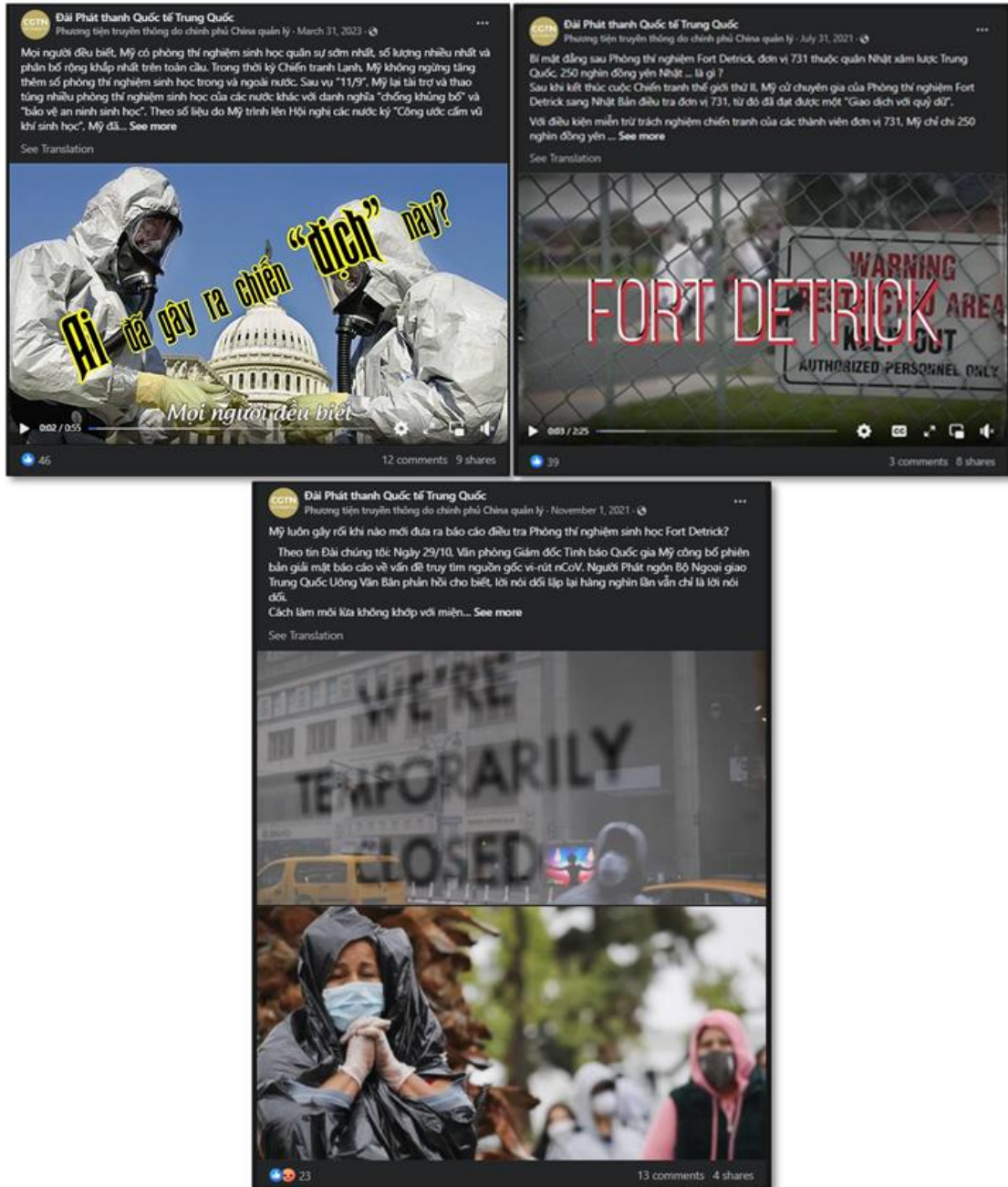
⁵<https://www.facebook.com/spoxwangwenbin/posts/pfbid02ystsgcMqhS6yZpwsHUmtt4FRjqjrKB8Vjf9FmHcmhrdFKVAw3JSkoum53zDNt9a7l>

⁶<https://www.facebook.com/spoxwangwenbin/posts/pfbid02tTb7QZsZgrSZbgh7VKdowpJgjRuWua2aMwuYiEqmVsf1chcauzwQGQV1FejEU53Wl>

⁷https://twitter.com/Zhou_Li_CHN/status/1723978250077286531

⁸<https://www.facebook.com/ChineseEmbassyinHanoi/posts/pfbid022CLLpYyfnmwBjmUasCGCkjtUzuqSkuodDD1Fr56d2i27LifanS7XUTG9B7iUFzSl>

around the world, and misleading posts claiming that COVID-19 originated in Fort Detrick in the USA:^{9,10,11}



The Chinese embassy posted about China’s maritime activity in the South China Sea, in an effort to portray such activity as helpful and beneficial. Other posts try to portray the USA as an outside force that threatens regional stability. See two posts on the Chinese embassy’s

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/criviet/videos/912625143123690>

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/criviet/videos/940365316509723/>

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/criviet/posts/pfbid02GQsSzhE6yvvf5nHVi3ZPUQ7xY2vshAAUtb97HSpkt5x3hJA6hnP2fJckmj7nttPQl>

Facebook page. One about helping a Vietnamese fisherman and one about the USA military activity in the area^{12,13}:

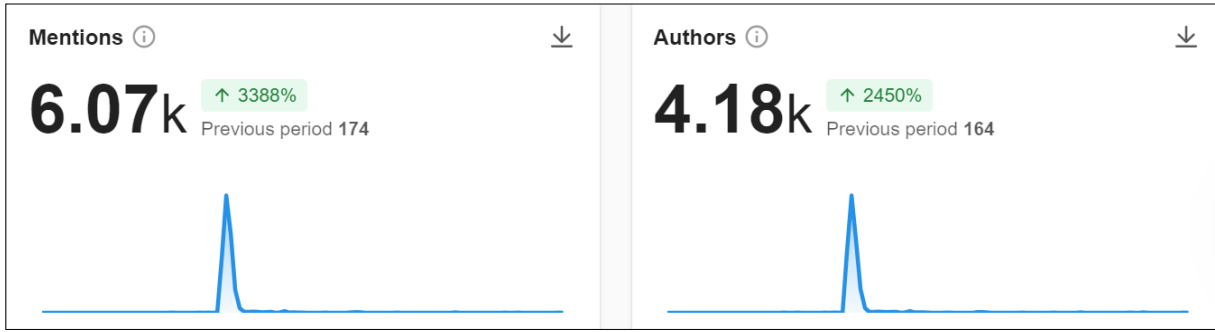


In terms of coordinated inauthentic behavior targeting Vietnam, we detected a network of inauthentic accounts on X that were created solely for propagating positive content about the China-Vietnam relationship before and during President Xi’s visit to Vietnam between December 12-13, 2023.

In the few days before Xi’s visit, Chinese state media sources like Xinhua started publishing content about the upcoming visit, and thousands of inauthentic accounts either reposted or copied and pasted the same content. Note the significant surge in mentions, which is compatible with the dates of President Xi’s visit to Vietnam, and the high number of accounts (authors) involved in the manipulated discourse. Many of the inauthentic accounts were created between November and December 2023. See examples of the inauthentic accounts’ activity:

¹²<https://www.facebook.com/ChineseEmbassyinHanoi/posts/pfbid04nAuVqNcwucmDpwikRXHDnUKkALKjCA17NRqjSM9k47484eajsg4EHDnE6NPuUJfL>

¹³<https://www.facebook.com/ChineseEmbassyinHanoi/posts/pfbid02gT3fsxAzYg82qwfzduHYHPJMnZbqZD7s3rvkLczer7pqDtALZLKsp5wRVKdjF5L>



<p>Catie Miller @miller_cat2... · 13 Dec 23 China and Vietnam are both socialist countries led by the Communist Party and a community with a shared future of strategic significance.</p> <p>2</p>	<p>Catie Miller @miller_cat2... · 12 Dec 23 China and Vietnam are both socialist countries led by the Communist Party and a community with a shared future of strategic significance.</p> <p>3</p>
<p>Catie Miller @miller_cat2... · 13 Dec 23 China-Vietnam friendship is a common asset that both China and Vietnam must safeguard and pass on.</p> <p>2</p>	<p>Catie Miller @miller_cat2... · 12 Dec 23 China-Vietnam friendship is a common asset that both China and Vietnam must safeguard and pass on.</p> <p>Vận hành thử nghiệm vận tải đường bộ quốc tế Trung Quốc-Việt Nam</p> <p>+</p>

Alliana Parker @AllianaP.. · 13 Dec 23 :
The traditional friendship between China and Vietnam was forged by the older generation leaders of both sides.



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Alliana Parker @AllianaP.. · 13 Dec 23 :
As an ordinary citizen, I sincerely hope this visit brings our two countries closer together!



🗨️ 🔄 ❤️ 📊 2 📌 🔗

Alliana Parker @AllianaP.. · 13 Dec 23 :
As good neighbors, good friends, good comrades and good partners, China and Vietnam are connected by mountains and rivers and closely interdependent.



Alliana Parker @AllianaP.. · 13 Dec 23 :
President Xi's visit to Vietnam will surely deepen the historical ties between our two countries.



Additional Chinese Influence

President Xi’s visit to Vietnam in December 2023 marked a development in China-Vietnam relations. State media sources from both countries referred to the visit as a “historic milestone” that would elevate the relations significantly, and Xi’s commentary was published by the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Vietnam, *Nhân Dân*.^{14, 15, 16}

Indeed, Vietnam endorsed China’s “community with shared future” approach and emphasized that its efforts to establish ties with other countries reflect its omnidirectional foreign policy. Therefore, developing ties with China is still Vietnam’s strategic choice¹⁷. On the one hand, this could signal an endorsement of an anti-US approach by Vietnam, which might undermine the latest upgrade to the Vietnam-US relations from September 2023, when the two countries agreed to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

However, since Vietnam normalized relations with China in 1991, Vietnam adopted a policy of assurance toward China that it will always prioritize relations with China and that improvement in relations with other countries does not constitute an anti-China policy. This policy of assurance serves an important purpose, which is to deter China from invading or coercing Vietnam by threatening to use force.¹⁸

Vietnam’s focus on fostering connections with the USA, Japan, Australia, and others, is for the purpose of establishing security and defense capabilities. This is because Vietnam is determined to protect its maritime sovereignty, and keep the option to cooperate with other powers to balance against China¹⁹. For example, in 2023 Vietnam upgraded its relations with South Korea to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership as well²⁰. At the same time, Vietnam continued to signal to China that it has no aggressive intentions. However, the recent war in Ukraine led Vietnam to rely more on the policy of assurance toward China, rather than on outside powers’ security commitments.²¹

Maritime incidents involving China and Vietnam in the South China Sea occurred in 2017, 2019, and recently in 2023, they ranged from threats to use force against Vietnam’s drilling

¹⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240103221128/https://xaydungchinhsach.chinhphu.vn/tong-bi-thu-nguyen-phu-trong-hoi-dam-voi-tong-bi-thu-chu-tich-nuoc-trung-quoc-tap-can-binh-119231212193408828.htm>

¹⁵ <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-12-11/Pillars-of-China-Vietnam-ties-Shared-culture-strong-trade-relations-1prPb2LNlKw/index.html>

¹⁶ <https://web.archive.org/web/20231219192440/https://nhandan.vn/xay-dung-cong-dong-chia-se-tuong-lai-trung-quoc-viet-nam-co-y-nghia-chien-luoc-mo-ra-trang-su-moi-chung-tay-huong-toi-hien-dai-hoa-post787021.html>

¹⁷ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240102213853/https://thedi diplomat.com/2023/12/vietnam-and-china-announce-major-upgrade-in-relations-during-xi-visit/>

¹⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240102213853/https://thedi diplomat.com/2023/12/vietnam-and-china-announce-major-upgrade-in-relations-during-xi-visit/>

¹⁹ <https://jamestown.org/program/vietnams-four-nos-policy-and-implications-for-vietnam-china-relations/>

²⁰ <https://fulcrum.sg/what-to-expect-from-the-vietnam-south-korea-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>

²¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20231216012128/https://thedi diplomat.com/2023/11/what-vietnam-can-learn-from-the-stalemate-in-ukraine/>

activities, to movement of vessels and a tense maritime standoff^{22, 23}. Vietnam’s reactions to these incidents reflect its policy of assurance toward China, as Vietnam’s then foreign minister reiterated the two countries’ common ideology, Vietnam’s support of China, and that the two countries’ relationship will enable them to manage the differences²⁴. In regards to the recent maritime incident from May 2023^{25, 26}, the same approach was utilized by Vietnam’s Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, who remarked that the China-Vietnam ideological bond would be a basis for cooperation in solving maritime issues²⁷. So far, China has cooperated with Vietnam’s policy of assurance, as China used the countries’ common ideology in order to link Vietnam to a China-led order and to prevent the USA from harming China-Vietnam relations by warning Vietnam from the interference of “outside forces”, meaning the USA, in the region²⁸.

Regarding the Belt and Road Initiative, Vietnam’s approach to seeking investment from China for domestic infrastructure development has been more cautious than that adopted by other countries in the region, such as Laos and Cambodia. Although the two countries have signed a memorandum of cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative, Vietnam has made no significant progress in advancing the initiative on the ground. Except for the Hanoi Metro Line (Cat Linh-Ha Dong) project, no new infrastructure projects under the BRI framework are currently under construction²⁹.

According to the China Index by Doublethink Lab organization, a civil society organization dedicated to studying the malign influence of digital authoritarianism, in 2021 Vietnam was the forty-third most influenced country by China across nine different fields.³⁰

²² <https://web.archive.org/web/20240114001532/http://thediplomat.com/2017/07/alarmed-escalation-in-the-south-china-sea-china-threatens-force-if-vietnam-continues-oil-exploration-in-spratlys/>

²³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-vietnam-china-southchinasea-idUKKCN1UC0MO/>

²⁴ https://web.archive.org/web/20240103221024/https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2792_663578/2794_663582/201908/t20190805_525896.html

²⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-ships-ignore-vietnam-demand-leave-area-close-russian-run-gas-fields-2023-05-26/>

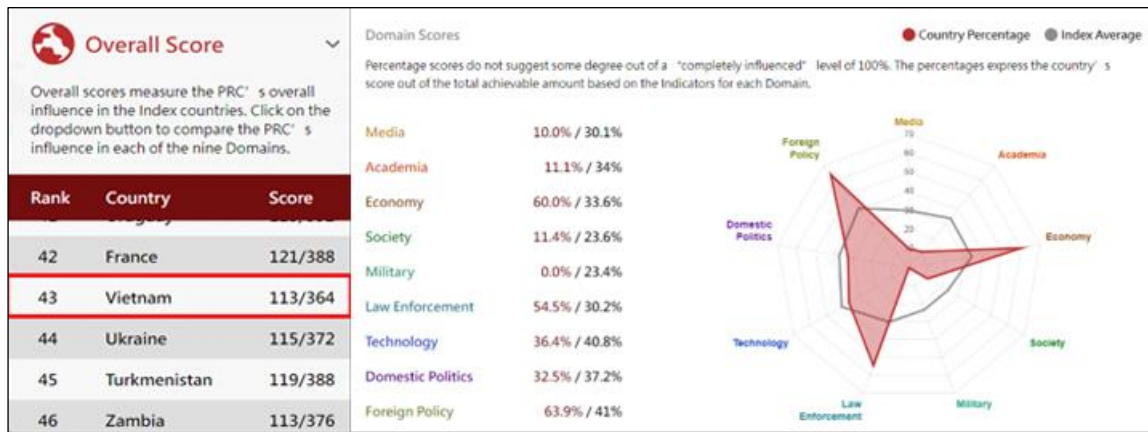
²⁶ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3220534/new-stand-between-vietnamese-and-chinese-ships-reported-south-china-sea>

²⁷ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2792_663578/2794_663582/202306/t20230630_11105948.html

²⁸ <https://news.yahoo.com/xi-asks-vietnam-stop-outsider-102613958.html>

²⁹ https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-99-9633-9_4

³⁰ <https://china-index.io/country/vietnam>



As can be seen in the graph above, the foreign policy, economy, and law enforcement fields were the most influenced by China. Key instances:

- China provides training to diplomats or civil servants from Vietnam.
- In Vietnam, politicians or government employees have been pressured by Chinese diplomats to change their political or diplomatic stances.
- There are reports of cyber-attacks targeting the government, critical infrastructure, or enterprises in Vietnam, that were suspected to be initiated from China.
- In Vietnam, law enforcement authorities have signed cooperation agreements with China on combatting terrorism.
- China is Vietnam's number one trading partner (for trade in goods only).
- Vietnam has been the target of Chinese economic coercion (like trade or investment sanctions) that was specifically tailored to products or services that are highly dependent on the Chinese market.



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