



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# BEYOND BOUNDARIES

THE CHINESE PARTY-STATE  
AND GEOCRIMINALITY IN  
SOUTH EAST ASIA

JUNE 2026

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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative
<b>CCCC</b>	China Communications Construction Company
<b>CCP</b>	Chinese Communist Party
<b>CoC</b>	Code of conduct
<b>CPPCC</b>	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
<b>CRCC</b>	China Railway Construction Corporation
<b>CREC</b>	China Railway Group Limited
<b>DSI</b>	(Thai) Department of Special Investigation
<b>ECRL</b>	East Coast Rail Link
<b>EEZ</b>	Exclusive economic zone
<b>FCI</b>	Foreign criminal interference
<b>FSPMI</b>	Federation of Metal Workers
<b>GIN</b>	GI-TOC Network of Experts
<b>GI-TOC</b>	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
<b>GSI</b>	(China's) Global Security Initiative
<b>ICC</b>	International Criminal Court
<b>MOU</b>	Memorandum of understanding
<b>NBI</b>	National Bureau of Investigation
<b>OSINT</b>	Open-source intelligence
<b>PDEA</b>	Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency
<b>POGO</b>	Philippines Offshore Gambling Operators
<b>PNR</b>	Philippine National Railways
<b>RCEP</b>	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
<b>TCPPRC</b>	Thailand Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China
<b>UFWD</b>	United Front Work Department
<b>UNCLOS</b>	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**B**ased on four in-depth case studies from South East Asia, this report finds substantial links between China's United Front System and criminal elements operating in the region. Building on previous research into foreign and state-embedded actors, the findings highlight potential geopolitical hazards that may affect the countries examined, the wider region and beyond.

The report raises various questions about contemporary state instrumentalization of crime, presenting evidence that the practice has developed and that the Chinese party-state model is a significant regional feature. These dynamics are compared to more widely documented examples of Russian state instrumentalization of criminality, with both identified as specific forms of a single, broader phenomenon.

The purpose of the report is to scrutinize growing evidence of geocriminality in South East Asia and map the emerging landscape. The report makes notable findings in the four countries explored: Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia. In all four case studies, there is evidence of Chinese party-state association with criminal actors, shaped in part by the expansion of the United Front System under Xi Jinping. The United Front System is a Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-led network that shapes and aligns actors outside the Party (including civil society, private sector, diaspora and other groups) to advance strategic objectives domestically and abroad (see 'What is China's United Front System?' section below).

This activity may be described as 'systemic geocriminality', particularly at provincial and sub-provincial levels. Rather than Beijing's direct micromanagement, it involves a system in which Chinese party-state actors seek to engage with criminal networks to influence and, at times, cooperate with them. In this context, criminal activity may be tolerated and sometimes even supported when it tilts sufficiently in Beijing's favour.

This report also documents the pitfalls Beijing faces in such an approach, which are illustrated with particular clarity in the case of the Philippines. Where alignment with state objectives break down, or when criminal activities result in substantial reputational costs, these actors may become the targets of Beijing's growing enforcement on Chinese criminal activity overseas.

Although there is some awareness of this developing threat in the countries studied, there remain significant blind spots concerning Chinese criminality in general and criminal links to China's United Front System within their borders. Monitoring the interface where the CCP and the outside world meet

both inside and outside China, the United Front System protects and advances the CCP's interests. Its permissive and occasionally supportive relationship with criminal elements abroad, documented in this report, constitutes a serious threat to the sites where it is active. This issue is exacerbated by a lack of resources, which can limit the efforts of the policymakers and law enforcement officials who are aware of this growing risk.

## Methodology

This report adopts a qualitative, case study-based research design to examine the intersection between foreign criminal activity and state-linked influence in South East Asia. The analysis is grounded in four in-depth country case studies: Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. These cases were selected to provide variation across illicit market structures, geopolitical alignments and exposure to Chinese influence, while also reflecting jurisdictions that have experienced high-profile incidents involving foreign criminal actors.

The empirical base draws on original field research and interviews conducted in the four countries, including engagement with policymakers, law enforcement officials, members of the judiciary and civil society groups. It also draws on documentary and open-source material, including policy reports, academic literature, investigative journalism and institutional publications. Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) is used to corroborate and contextualize findings across jurisdictions. The analysis synthesizes these sources to identify patterns of interaction, incentives and alignment between criminal actors and state-linked structures.

The research is informed by prior analytical work undertaken by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), particularly the Global Organized Crime Index and related studies on foreign actors and state-embedded criminality. These sources provide a comparative baseline and situate the findings within broader global trends.

The study is structured around three core research questions: (1) the extent to which criminal actors contribute to the pursuit of party-state objectives; (2) the nature of relationships between foreign criminal actors, the Chinese party-state and local elites; and (3) the role of domestic conditions in shaping these interactions. These questions guide both data interpretation and cross-case comparison.

Methodologically, the report combines comparative case analysis with conceptual and typological development. Key analytical constructs, including 'foreign criminality', 'foreign criminal interference' and 'geocriminality', are defined and applied to interpret patterns observed across the case studies. This approach enables consistency in analyzing diverse manifestations of criminal-state interaction.

## Key points

- This interaction is conceptualized as 'systemic geocriminality'; not direct central control, but a system in which multiple party-state components engage with criminal actors in ways that advance state interests.
- Criminal actors are effectively incentivized to operate in alignment with Beijing's geostrategic priorities, without direct micromanagement.
- The primary determinant of tolerance or support appears to be whether activity is perceived as a net benefit or cost to the party-state.

- The report finds that state instrumentalization of crime has developed beyond earlier models, representing a more embedded and transnational form of interaction linked to globalization.
- Evidence across Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia shows consistent patterns of association between Chinese-linked criminal actors and elements of the party-state, albeit with variation shaped by local conditions.
- Local political, economic and institutional conditions play a decisive role in shaping how these relationships manifest, including the extent of criminal influence and state engagement.
- The Chinese party-state's United Front System functions as a key interface, facilitating influence beyond China's borders and enabling engagement with a wide spectrum of actors, including elements of criminal networks.
- There are clear risks and limitations to this model, including reputational damage and operational failure, as illustrated particularly in the Philippines case.
- Despite growing awareness, significant blind spots remain among policymakers and law enforcement regarding the scale and nature of Chinese-linked criminality and its connections to state systems.
- The report concludes that the permissive and occasionally supportive relationship between state-linked structures and criminal actors represents a serious and under-recognized regional threat, exacerbated by limited resources and institutional capacity.



## STATE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF CRIME

In 2025, the GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index revealed a sharp global increase in the involvement of foreign actors in criminality,<sup>1</sup> particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. The Index also highlights the continued pervasiveness of state-embedded actors against the backdrop of increasing geopolitical competition. In this context, state instrumentalization of crime appears to have changed. Previously considered an element of clandestine interference operations, the capacity and tolerance for broader state linkages to criminal activity beyond national borders have been reinforced by the transnational networks generated through globalization.<sup>2</sup> This enhanced form of state instrumentalization is referred to as 'geocriminality' (see definition).<sup>3</sup>



View of the Laos–China high-speed railway. Activities linked to China's Belt and Road Initiative are seen to bolster actors' legitimacy in the region. © Ore Huiying for The Washington Post via Getty Images

## What is geocriminality?

Though states have long used crime for strategic purposes, the manner and depth of such instrumentalization have changed radically. Until recently, state use of crime abroad was considered a single element of 'clandestine diplomacy' within hybrid interference, alongside geoeconomics and disinformation.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of geocriminality reflects changes in the scale, scope and reach of state instrumentalization of criminal networks, enabled partially by increased global interconnectedness. It recognizes that transnational criminal actors have gained influence and, in some cases, become increasingly embedded within and across state structures, able to influence high-stakes political outcomes.

The concept as it stands can take two forms. Episodic (state-directed) geocriminality refers to 'action taken based typically around distinct tasks such as an act of arson, an assassination, or a cyber-attack, for example'. Systemic

geocriminality refers to 'a longer-term form where criminals are tolerated and, in some cases, actively supported by the state so long as the criminals' activities generate sufficient benefit for the state'.<sup>5</sup> The two are not mutually exclusive and sit on a spectrum rather than as distinct categories.

Episodic geocriminality is typically associated with Russian state activity, while systemic forms are more closely associated with the Chinese party-state. In the latter, interaction between party-state and criminality, in certain instances, resembles the 'latent network',<sup>6</sup> in which private business actors and organizations pursue their own objectives while remaining within informally established boundaries that align their own interests with those of the CCP. In the case studies in this report, the China-linked criminal actors appear to be doing precisely that: pursuing their own objectives while remaining subject to the party-state influence when it matters. ■

Amid these conditions, this situational report explores China-linked foreign criminality in four South East Asian nations: Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. These cases are selected for four key reasons: (1) all face significant challenges related to foreign criminal actors, and over the past decade have responded to high-profile cases involving Chinese crime groups; (2) they reflect a range of illicit markets prominent in each country; (3) they differ in terms of their relationships with China, the United States and other powers (the Philippines being a key US ally, while Indonesia is traditionally part of a non-aligned movement); (4) unlike other cases in the region, such as Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, where China has much higher levels of influence, they present significant obstacles vis-à-vis Chinese security influence.

Research has revealed that criminality involving both state-embedded and foreign actors is particularly serious in South East Asia.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, substantial migration of Chinese criminal actors into the region over the past two decades warrants greater scrutiny. In the context of the relationship between the Chinese party-state's United Front System and criminal actors (discussed below), this is a particularly notable development in state instrumentalized criminality. The analysis is framed around three core research questions:

- To what extent is there evidence that criminals play a role in China's pursuit of party-state objectives in South East Asia?
- What is the nature of the relationship between China-linked criminals, the Chinese party-state and local elites?
- How important are local conditions in shaping the nature of these relationships?

Understanding China's geostrategic objectives in the region is central to the case studies. These include asserting dominance over the South China Sea, establishing regional acceptance of China's view of its 'territorial integrity', weakening the influence of other powers (notably the US and Japan), strengthening trade connectivity in the region (particularly through major infrastructure projects) and expanding Chinese security influence, consolidating support for China's Global Security Initiative (GSI). Efforts to curtail online gambling and cyber scams that target China, or which are perceived to compromise Chinese interests, also form part of this agenda. The regional objectives effectively shape the context in which state-criminal interaction happens and may incentivize certain forms of (criminal) activity. Where there is an objective of significant importance to Beijing, for example, one can expect to find more opportunities for criminals, and arguably a more accommodating stance from party-state officials. In spite of common patterns across cases, local conditions influence how these dynamics manifest.

At the same time, country-specific interests come to the fore. The findings from Indonesia, for example, are shaped by Beijing's geostrategic objectives in the realm of mineral extraction and processing. In the Philippines, emphasis is on Chinese claims in the South China Sea with a view to preventing the Philippines from asserting the ruling of the 2016 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) arbitration. In the context of findings that suggest the Chinese party-state is in fact willing to engage with prominent criminals where it is useful to do so, these objectives take on another role. Criminals can use them (and arguably *must* use them) as a means to demonstrate their continued usefulness to elements of the Chinese party-state. In a game of ill-defined rules, the result is that, though not micromanaged by Beijing, these criminals are incentivized to act in line with Beijing's objectives, or at least appear to be. Even though highly complex, outcomes appear to depend more on whether Chinese authorities consider the criminal activity a net benefit or a net cost to the party-state.

## Definitions

In the context of contentious and often contested terms employed to describe criminal phenomena and related state presence, the list below explicitly defines some of the key terms in the report.

### Foreign criminality

While a 'foreign criminal' is typically defined as a state and/or non-state criminal actor operating outside their home country, 'foreign criminality' in this report refers to organized crime carried out in a jurisdiction that is not the actor's own, or by individuals acting as proxies for or in collusion with foreign criminals.<sup>8</sup> These definitions recognise that criminality does not always lead to a conviction and that distinctions between foreign and domestic criminality are increasingly blurred, including through practices such as the acquisition of alternative nationalities.<sup>9</sup>

### Foreign criminal activity and the influence versus interference dichotomy

Academic and think-tank discourse often distinguishes between foreign influence and foreign interference. Influence (connected to either soft or hard power) is generally seen as a more acceptable and transparent means of advancing state objectives. Interference<sup>10</sup> is characterised by deceptive, covert, coercive, or corrupt activities. The boundary between the two is not always clear, as in the case of malign influence.

This report considers 'foreign criminal interference' as a result of 'foreign criminal activity', which is present in most jurisdictions. Where such activity enables criminal actors to significantly interfere in a country's affairs, it may constitute interference.

The distinction between 'influence' and 'interference' is common in modern political science. Some of the activities considered in this report, for example United Front operations (see 'United Front System' section below), blur these boundaries, combining elements of influence, interference and counter-interference'.<sup>11</sup>

## Foreign criminal interference

Foreign criminal activity may develop into foreign criminal interference (FCI) where the criminal groups exert significant influence within a host country including links to political elites. Such interference may be instrumentalised by non-state entities pursuing their own interests, though states may also seek to instrumentalize these networks to advance their objectives. Where this occurs in a sustained manner, it can be considered geocriminality.<sup>12</sup> While attention should be paid to which part of the state is active, there is also a risk in ascribing activity to certain elements of the

state in isolation. Assigning agency only to provincial-level government at the country's border or to a specific ministry risks overlooking the fact that Beijing continues to sustain and benefit in a wider sense from the system that tolerates engaging with demonstrably well-known criminal actors.

## State-embedded actors and private sector actors

The report also refers to state-embedded actors and private sector actors, with the 2025 Global Organized Crime Index identifying the former as 'the most pervasive criminal actor type globally' and the latter as 'architects of criminal expansion'.<sup>13</sup> The case studies support these findings, highlighting their central role and the fluid boundaries between them. The extent to which foreign criminals become embedded within state structures appears to be a vital factor shaping outcomes, particularly in relation to their perceived value to the party-state. ■

## What is China's United Front System?

The case studies refer to the Chinese party-state's United Front System. This is effectively a network that influences groups outside the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and promotes ideological and strategic alignment with the party. The network broaches civil society groups, private sector actors, educational institutions, religious organizations and Chinese diaspora communities. Operating both within and beyond China's borders, United Front activity is a manifestation of a CCP political strategy that manages the interface where China and the outside world meet. While the United Front's activities are generally opaque at the periphery, they are 'likely to be supervised by provincial or even municipal UFWDs [United Front Work Departments]'.<sup>14</sup>

The head of the UFWD holds a powerful ministerial-level status. United Front expert Gerry Groot notes that the department 'ranks marginally ahead of both the Central Department of Organization and that of Propaganda'.<sup>15</sup> The current minister, Li Ganjie, is a member of the Politburo and also one of the seven secretaries of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Party, placing him at a rank equal to that of the Minister of Public Security, Wang Xiaohong. Within the UFWD, there are at present nine bureaus responsible for 'Party Work', 'Ethnic and Religious Work', 'Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, & Overseas', 'Cadre', 'Economics', 'Independent & Non Party Intellectuals Work', 'Tibet', 'New Social Class Representatives Work' and 'Xinjiang'.<sup>16</sup> Its structure changes according to priorities and perceived threats; for example, the Tibet and Xinjiang bureaus were created in 2006 and 2017, respectively.

The concept of the United Front was originally brought to China by the Soviets, but its characteristics were 'sinicised and systemised by Mao in the late 1930s'.<sup>17</sup> Its development does not fit neatly into

traditional Western frameworks of politics and power. United Front activity is not an example of a nation state protecting its assets but a political party advancing its interests. Building out the original idea, Mao invented

political properties for the concept, to the point of turning it into an infallible ideological weapon, leading inexorably to the consolidation of the Party's hegemony, whatever the context. The result was a hybrid notion – an operational attribute of Communist power – that included elements of discourse, organisation, power and myth.<sup>18</sup>

During its early development, the United Front's approach was used to structure engagement with a range of actors, including underworld elements such as the Jingganshan and the Gelaohui secret societies in Northern Shaanxi.<sup>19</sup> As the CCP sought to consolidate control, it relied on a broad spectrum of societal actors. Still not able to “hold” the towns... [the CCP] needed proxies to manage urban society and take control in the quietest possible way', including through liaison with existing groups and prominent individuals, gangsters among them.<sup>20</sup>

Once the PRC took power, the United Front System became more of a method for the party to engage and steer Chinese society from a position of dominance, as well as a tool in internal party dynamics. With fluctuating use across different periods, its usefulness became evident once again as the CCP began to bring a wider spectrum of groups and individuals into the fold; this was how a revolutionary party was able to manage, guide and maintain power over non-revolutionary elements (such as the business sector).

A frequently cited historical example of CCP flexibility was the then Minister of Public Security Tao Siju's outreach to 'patriotic' triads in 1993 as part of efforts to neutralize criminal elements around the handover of Hong Kong.<sup>21</sup> As United Front activity expanded, similar approaches to engagement with criminality also became more prevalent.



The United Front System is a network that promotes China's interests overseas while maintaining alignment with the party's strategies. © Hector Retamal/AFP via Getty Images

Globalization and further reforms to the United Front System have extended these dynamics beyond China's borders. Earlier forms of engagement were connected with street-level triad activity as in the case of Tao Siju above, while developments in technology, communication and travel have been associated with more sophisticated and transnational relationships, contributing to what would ultimately develop into geocriminality.

Even though the principle of engaging actors at the periphery of the United Front is a constant, the scope has expanded alongside these enabling factors. In the case of Russia's 'episodic' geocriminality, developments associated with globalization (such as the advances in communication and technology) have facilitated a 'gig economy' approach to covert activity overseas, enabling the state to outsource such operations more effectively to groups and individuals, including criminals.<sup>22</sup> China's 'systemic' geocriminality involves broader and more complex networks. For example, the case studies not only include individuals who manage their criminal interests in the countries examined, but also appear at United Front events in China and maintain business interests that cross jurisdictions. Developments in communication and technology have also facilitated Beijing's connections with overseas Chinese communities, through social media platforms, for example. As the case studies demonstrate, Beijing's relationship with these communities is an important factor in broader toleration and support for criminality.

Upon becoming CCP General Secretary, Xi Jinping increased the United Front's power and status as well as its dedicated resources. Under his leadership, the United Front Work Department (UFWD) absorbed tens of thousands of new cadres into its ranks, and Xi personally invested significant political capital into the UFWD's standing.<sup>23</sup> Alongside the enduring approach to criminality and added capacity from the effects of globalization, the strengthening of the United Front System's foundation in Beijing has also contributed to some of the overseas activity documented in this report.

An additional important element of the United Front System is the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which functions as a consultative body under the guidance of the CCP. It brings together various groups, including CCP-led 'democratic political parties' and is described in its own literature as 'an organization in the patriotic United Front of the Chinese people'.<sup>24</sup> It also includes 'prominent figures in non-political spheres ... as well non-CCP political figures and representatives of minority groups as well as diaspora figures'. The most vital feature is that 'CPPCC members are hand-picked by the CCP'.<sup>25</sup> This is relevant when considering the role of the institution in the case studies.

## **South East Asia's foreign criminal landscape**

Considered together, the four case studies produce several findings, from which two central and interconnected conclusions stand apart. The first is a recurrence of Chinese party-state association with criminal elements in various forms, apparently broader and deeper than existing examples of such activity elsewhere. Second, outcomes of these efforts vary across countries, revealing important similarities and discrepancies that reflect each country's domestic conditions. The findings suggest an under-researched foreign criminal landscape that plays a significant role in the wider geopolitical shifts of the region.

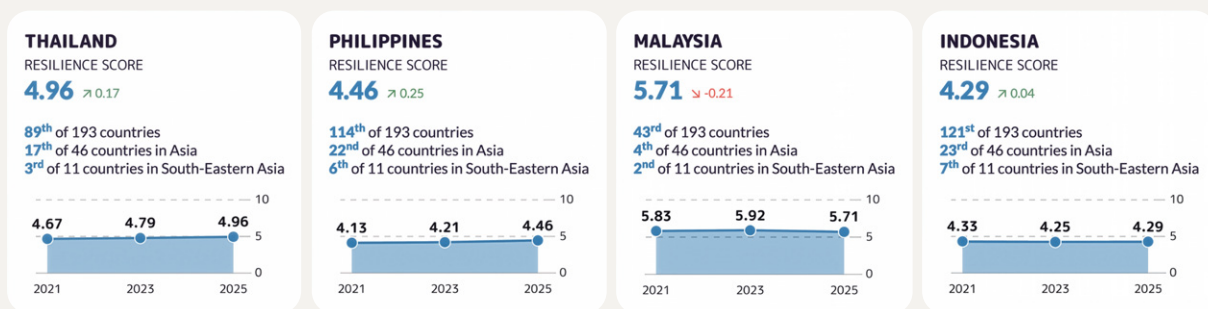
Chinese state-crime nexus activity includes probable state instrumentalization of criminal elements, though additional examples reveal a more complex relationship. Across the case studies, party-state entities and officials associate with and, in some cases, forge official links to criminal actors operating in the countries in question. Several examples involve the party-state's United Front System and

affiliated organizations. In the Thai case, for example, the central organization identified acted as a crucible where United Front and criminal groups overlap. Likewise, in the case of the Philippines, research focal point Michael Yang is welcomed into United Front organizations and hosts various CCP officials despite apparent serious criminality that later generated a national scandal.<sup>26</sup> Malaysia's case study includes party-state links to criminality and surveys the 1MDB scandal to further demonstrate party-state capacity to tolerate criminality and harbour criminal actors. These observations are made in an environment also shaped by – and consistent with – other Chinese party-state activity abroad, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) where structural opacity enables actors to self-identify with BRI-linked activity, thereby enhancing legitimacy. It also leaves space for Beijing to later disavow ties if such activity is deemed undesirable. Over the course of the case studies, however, this wider approach to crime by the party-state carries certain risks. This is evident in the Philippines where criminal activity became a newsworthy story.

One area where both the risks and rewards of this approach to crime are most evident is in the Chinese party-state's engagement with domestic elites. The relationship between such elites and criminality is a critical factor in shaping outcomes. Where such groups boast the ability to escape scrutiny or dominate sectors (both licit and illicit), collaboration with them offers foreign criminal groups a pathway into a new territory. In the case of Indonesia, for example, the pre-existing domestic elite network that permeates officialdom, military and criminality represents an indispensable channel to pursue one's objectives. However, while effectively monopolising the state-crime nexus, that domestic network can also limit the capacity of foreign criminal networks to establish their own elite linkages. In the Philippines, the election of Rodrigo Duterte, a relative outsider at the time, generated a significant opportunity for the type of Chinese party-state criminal-involved engagement this report exposes. That election effectively shook up the Philippine political elite to the advantage of China's wider United Front approach, which already had an underworld link with Duterte.<sup>27</sup>

Related to the domestic elite configuration, the strength, positioning and competence of local criminal groups is also relevant when assessing the success of the Chinese party-state. In a curious way, the local criminal ecosystem can impact the resilience each country has to foreign criminal interference in general.

The GI-TOC's 2025 Crime Index shows that the countries have disparate resilience profiles in general (with Malaysia scoring 5.71 and Indonesia 4.29 for example, against a global average of 4.78).<sup>28</sup>



**FIGURE 1** Resilience scores of the four case study countries.

SOURCE: GI-TOC, Global Organized Crime Index 2025, 10 November 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-global-organized-crime-index-2025/>

Significant differences are also evident in the case of the foreign criminality. While all four countries demonstrate China-linked crime in some form, there are instances where such actors appear unable to establish substantial connections with the host state itself. Although the reason for these failures is complex, the presence of entrenched domestic criminal groups appears to be significant. In Malaysia for example, the links forged with Nicky Liow appear to be a 'least worst' option for the Chinese criminals involved, who evidently had difficulty circumnavigating domestic criminal networks replete with their own connections to power.

Both the research and conversations with various stakeholders in the four countries identify a lack of resources in the response to foreign criminality (state-linked or otherwise). These constraints may create opportunities for foreign criminal networks to 'support' law enforcement officials and can limit the capacity of authorities to pursue foreign criminality when threats are identified. In terms of the former, one example from the Thai case study identifies a Chinese criminal central to the network under scrutiny. He cultivates relations with various senior police officers, currying favour by funding renovations to a multipurpose meeting room at the division.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, the lack of resources limits the ability of each country to pursue criminality once identified.<sup>30</sup>

Even though most similarities identified across the case studies relate to vulnerabilities around foreign criminality, there are some common features tied to resilience. Where present, civil society actors (particularly in domestic media and political opposition) often play an important role in exposing the types of networks, conflicts of interest and foreign criminal interference. Each case contains examples of admirable investigative reporting that often inspired further scrutiny. In addition, the Philippine and Malaysian cases both provide strong evidence of multi-party politics as a source of resilience, which is particularly valuable where forms of elite capture and compromise are in evidence. Given the seriousness of the findings, these catalysts of resilience should be protected and supported.

Overall, the findings suggest that foreign criminality in the region continues to represent a significant challenge, and increasingly overlaps with the geopolitical and security realms.

*In a game of ill-defined rules, the result is that, though not micromanaged by Beijing, these criminals are incentivized to act in line with Beijing's objectives.*



# COUNTRY PROFILES

## Thailand

The Chinese party-state has a range of geostrategic, political and economic interests in Thailand. Beyond specific objectives, core concerns remain at the fore, such as China's territorial integrity and national security. Engagement with Thailand reflects the Chinese party-state's broader geostrategic interests, including port access and wider regional projects. The latter includes China's plans for regional rail connectivity, building on the Laos–China railway to ultimately link Bangkok to Kunming – the China-Laos-Thailand corridor.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Thailand's role as a Mekong country speaks directly to Chinese party-state interest in transboundary river systems – see, for example, the potential for Thai activism to impede Chinese dam building aspirations.<sup>32</sup> Many Thai activists and academics believe that their role in this struggle with China around resources in the Mekong is of particular importance, arguing that 'as Thai people we need to have a say and we should be able to ask questions, because in other countries like Laos and Myanmar, people do not have the space to raise such questions'.<sup>33</sup>

Several party-state objectives intersect with these interests. China's campaign against Uyghurs in Xinjiang, for example, is considered an important domestic issue to Beijing, but spilt over into Thailand because it became an escape route for fleeing Uyghurs.<sup>34</sup>

Chinese party-state interest in the Chinese community in Thailand exhibits some parallels with the Uyghur situation, particularly with Beijing monitoring dissidents, maintaining a presence with the large Chinese citizen population and sustaining some purchase over views of China. Although estimates vary, the Thai-Chinese community is believed to make up around 10 to 12 per cent of the total Thai population. The majority are Teochew background (originating from Guangdong province), with other regions well represented, such as Fujian.<sup>35</sup> Community groups with shared ancestral background have played an important role in community building among the Chinese diaspora.<sup>36</sup>

Commercial concerns bleed into more political interests, for example agriculture and e-commerce, which are both explicitly mentioned in China's 2025 joint statement with Thailand.<sup>37</sup> Agricultural trade is connected to China's food security contingencies, while e-commerce overlaps with growing regulatory interest in the digital sphere. Thailand represents a potential partner in China's global governance reform aspirations, including Beijing's Global Security Initiative (GSI). Beijing sees Thailand as a vital player in regional criminal and security matters, most notably combating the rise of the cyber

scam industry. Indeed, the joint statement contains reference to cooperation on transnational crime, with a focus on ‘drug trafficking, online gambling and call center scam operations’.<sup>38</sup>

Despite diplomatic positioning, Thailand is one of the least enthusiastic countries in the region in terms of Chinese regional security influence and, at ground level, proposals for joint patrols with Chinese police on Thai soil generated a fierce public backlash and eventually a reversal.<sup>39</sup>

## **The Thai-Asia Economic Exchange Association**

Scrutiny of state interests, foreign criminality and local officialdom in Thailand yields a potentially illuminating case study where Chinese party-state influence organs, police investigations into criminality and local Thai elites appear to overlap. The Thai-Asia Economic Exchange Association (亚泰经济交流总商会) (hereafter ‘Thai-Asia Association’) was formed in 2019 as a platform for Chinese businesspeople in Thailand, but drew international coverage in 2023 when a senior member of the organization was implicated in a scam centre scandal.<sup>40</sup> Closer examination of the group suggests some of its members sit at the intersection of state and criminality.

The Thai-Asia Association has a profile that includes interaction with Chinese party-state entities and alignment with several of their objectives. Events are regularly attended by senior members of the Chinese embassy staff, as well as various officials visiting from China and members of United Front System groups – see, for example, 2023’s inauguration ceremony of the third board of directors of the Thai-Asia group.<sup>41</sup> Speeches and contents of such events could provide insight into how the Thai-Asia Association positions itself in regard to China’s wider interests. For example, at the inauguration event, the speech given by the president of the association, Li Shengjiao (also known as Hia Kao), made reference to defined party-state interests, which also reflected the party-state’s own language.

Li explained that the group’s founding purpose was to work together for common development, with reference to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). He included references to ‘trade, investment, tourism, e-commerce, new energy forms and technology’.<sup>42</sup> The speech also contained recognizable party-state slogans, such as a commitment to ‘tell China’s story well’ (讲好中国故事) and to help build ‘a shared future for Thailand and China and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ (为构建泰中友好命运共同体·为中华民族伟大复兴贡献力量). The initiative to tell China’s story well was introduced by Xi Jinping in 2013 and ‘encapsulates the notion that Party-state media and even quasi-private actors must work internationally to strengthen and innovate external propaganda’.<sup>43</sup>

## **The presence of the United Front**

Beyond the central role of China’s United Front System in its international engagement and diaspora relations, the Thai case illustrates the importance of region-specific approaches. It also clarifies the positioning of the Thai-Asia Association regarding the Chinese party-state. Research into the association’s activity reveals United Front System linkages, particularly to Guangdong-based United Front organizations. The regional dimension of United Front engagement in this instance reflects Sino-Thai community roots discussed above.

Visits by the Thai-Asia Association to the Chinese mainland regularly include meetings with members of various United Front System groups. In November 2022, for example, Li Shengjiao and other members of the association met with individuals from the Meizhou Municipal United Front Work Department and the Meizhou Returned Overseas Chinese Federation, including Cui Yi, minister of

the Meizhou level UFWD. Members were reminded to 'maintain their patriotic spirit and actively participate in the economic development of their homeland, and make more contributions to the prosperity of their motherland'.<sup>44</sup>

Multiple meetings over the years have replicated this format and demonstrate these forms of linkages to the United Front System. Another example involved a meeting with the UFWD of the Guangdong Provincial Party Committee in 2023. Such interactions are well covered on the Thai-Asia Association's own social media.<sup>45</sup> The Guangdong Provincial Party Committee meeting echoed Li's own speech above, and the association members were urged to 'tell the story of friendly exchanges between China and Thailand well' (讲好中泰友好交往的故事).

Among these engagements, records of a meeting with an overseas Chinese federation under the guidance of the United Front System further illustrate the proximity that the Thai-Asia leadership maintains with the network. Details from a 2025 Thai-Asia delegation to Pingyuan County in China lists Li Shengjiao as an honorary chairman of the Meizhou Overseas Chinese Federation (OCF).<sup>46</sup> In the context of the United Front's objectives, Li's positioning here and the Thai-Asia Association's wider engagement with United Front System groups over the years place the association in the orbit of China's overseas influence efforts. According to the website of the Meizhou OCF, the organization is under the leadership of the city's party committee, and serves as a bridge, 'bonding the party and government with the vast number of returned overseas Chinese, their relatives, and overseas Chinese compatriots'.<sup>47</sup>

A comment by Li in a 2022 United Front System publication could be seen to attest to this relationship. Li stated, in his capacity as the association's president, that he attended the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. He reports that 'for many years, all members of the Thai-Asia Economic Exchange Association have been deeply concerned about the motherland and have unequivocally supported its policies and the great cause of peaceful reunification'. He notes that they 'eagerly look forward to ... contributing to the prosperity and strength of our motherland'.<sup>48</sup>

## Hongmen and wider criminality

An overlap of potential relevance in this case involves individuals involved in criminal activity establishing or becoming entangled in what are known as 'Hongmen' associations. The term originally referred to various forms of secret societies dating back to the period of transition between the Ming and Qing Dynasties in the 17th century and is sometimes translated into English as 'Chinese Freemasons'.<sup>49</sup> The term has been commandeered and misapplied throughout its history, serving as a tool alluding to a mystical solidarity for nationalist ends, but is also associated with a broad range of political movements around the world. These include Chinese pro-democracy movements established by diaspora groups in the 1920s, as well as associations with ties to Sun Yat-sen, Taiwan's Kuomintang party and Hong Kong.<sup>50</sup> In the early 1950s, China brought some elements of a Hongmen-linked political movement into its sphere of influence, providing space for the establishment of what is known today at the Zhi Gong Party, which functioned to align some elements of the overseas Hongmen movement that supported the Kuomintang party with the CCP.<sup>51</sup> The Zhi Gong Party today represents one of several 'democratic parties' that are aligned with the CCP, and which maintain representation in the CPPCC (discussed above).

While numerous Hongmen associations continue to exist today, many of them have become targets of United Front operations due in part to the CPPCC linkages. Others seem to have become the focus of criminal actors looking potentially to build connections and influence with the Chinese party-state.<sup>52</sup>

One of the most well-known potential figures is the alleged former leader of the Macau 14K triad, Wan Kuok-koi (known as Broken Tooth), who in 2013 established a Hongmen association as a front for a criminal network operating across South East Asia and beyond.<sup>53</sup> Wan was a leading figure during Macau's violence-ridden 1990s, a time when the city was compared with 1920s Chicago.<sup>54</sup> Established in 2013 after Wan had completed a lengthy spell in prison,<sup>55</sup> the World Hongmen Historical and Cultural Association (WHCA) emerged as a platform that appears as a cover for criminal activity based primarily in South East Asia, but with operations and connections in Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. Wan has developed what appear as legitimate businesses alongside criminal activity, becoming involved in cryptocurrency, property development, scam centres and money laundering.<sup>56</sup> Wan's activities began to catch up with him again in the 2020s, with his associates targeted in Malaysia and Thailand.<sup>57</sup> He was sanctioned in 2020 by the US Department of the Treasury.<sup>58</sup> Wan's WHCA network, which has expanded beyond the region, has also been targeted by authorities for its criminal activity and is increasingly featured in the media.<sup>59</sup>

Another Hongmen organization with ties to the United Front and Wan is the Taiwan-based World Hongmen Association (WHA), which is linked to the World Hongmen Foundation. The chairperson of both groups, Liu Huijin, has established ties to Wan, and the membership of the WHA overlaps with that of Broken Tooth's WHCA.<sup>60</sup> For his part, Wan has cultivated ties with Liu's WHA, which could be interpreted as a means to align it with the positions of the CCP's United Front, but may also be part of an effort to appropriate a Hongmen culture to cloak his criminal activities.

It is important to note that Liu and Wan's incarnations of the Hongmen sit alongside many other historical Hongmen associations around the world, many of which are not connected to criminal activity.

Wang Hongbin (also known as Oudum Wang), for example, not only 'has a long history of involvement in fraud spanning Laos, Thailand, and Vanuatu', but is employed as a foundational case study in academic discourse on Chinese grey capital in Thailand – 'transnational operations that combine legitimate and illegitimate business'.<sup>61</sup> These linkages and networks form the vital criminal context in which members of the Thai-Asia Association appear to overlap with Hongmen, Wang having been given a title from Liu as the WHA's Thailand branch leader in 2017.

In February 2023, Thai police raided the Overseas Hongmen Culture Exchange Center in Bangkok for 'operating illegally and serving as a front for Chinese organized crime'.<sup>62</sup> The raid revealed that the small office building was shared with the Thai-Asia Association.<sup>63</sup> In a letter sent to Reuters, the association claimed they had never had any dealings or relationships with gang-related organizations.<sup>64</sup> However, investigations into records of association events and meetings (including posts from their own social media account) suggest that links with the Thailand Hongmen branch may run deeper than previously understood.

There are multiple records of members of the Thailand Hongmen network in attendance at Thai-Asia Association events, and vice-versa. At the association's 2023 Chinese New Year celebration, for example, guests included senior members of the Thai Hongmen Association.<sup>65</sup> The background of key personnel also points to a deeper form of interconnection. Just prior to the founding of Thai-Asia, Li Shengjiao attended a Hongmen event promoting the Belt and Road Initiative where he was listed as an advisor of the Thailand Hongmen Federation.<sup>66</sup>

In 2018, a major Hongmen event titled 'Asian Hongmen Leaders Conference', saw attendees give speeches 'pledging to contribute to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' (誓为中华民族伟大复兴贡献力量), again echoing the party-state propaganda slogans as a form of signalling discussed

above. Li Shengjiao was in attendance, but on this occasion was listed as vice president of the Thailand Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (TCPPRC – 泰国中国和平统一促进会).<sup>67</sup> This link to the TCPPRC is an important detail since the various chapters of the Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China play a significant role in the party-state's overseas United Front work.<sup>68</sup> Demonstrating an institutional linkage, the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification – under which the various internationally located chapters sit – lists the Minister of the UFWD as its executive vice chair.<sup>69</sup> Taken together, the evidence suggests that the Thai-Asia Association operates within the same networks that include the Hongmen, alongside Chinese party-state influence organizations.

This case study began with a reference to a scandal that drew attention to the Thai-Asia Association in 2023. Those reports indicated that the association's vice president at that time, Wang Yicheng, was connected to the notorious cyber scam site KK Park, on the Thai-Myanmar border, from which a cryptocurrency account in his name had received millions of dollars attributable to scams. In such scams, 'fraudsters manipulate unsuspecting people they meet online, persuading them to invest in bogus crypto schemes' or elicit capital by other means such as using false identities.<sup>70</sup> One blockchain analysis firm traced US\$9.1 million attributable to scams to Wang's account, though the total is suspected to be much higher.<sup>71</sup> US authorities claimed that the account in Wang's name had received more than US\$90 million, with an affidavit from a secret service special agent indicating, 'this level of activity is indicative of an account controlled by a criminal organisation for the purpose of laundering stolen funds'.<sup>72</sup>

In isolation, one could contend that Wang's apparent position as beneficiary of a criminal network is not connected to his role with the Thai-Asia Association. The organization's overlaps with Hongmen networks, outlined above, provide an additional layer of context. A closer look at the activities of the Thailand-based Hongmen organizations would suggest a repeated pattern of involvement with cyber-scams-related activities in Myanmar. Going back to 2019, Wang Hongbin and other figures associated with a Thailand-based Hongmen Association became publicly involved in facilitating business links for key criminal actors involved in establishing large scale scam compounds on the Thailand border. In the case of Wang Hongbin, from 2017 until around 2020, he partnered with the notorious cyberscam kingpin

She Zhijiang to establish a platform for the development of blockchain and fintech, which seems to have been utilized as part of a strategy to frame the Shwe Kokko Yatai New City – a notorious cyberscam hub – as a smart city.<sup>73</sup> In a second example, members of the Thai Hongmen association also became involved with She Zhijiang and the Yatai New City Project in 2019 regarding discussions connected to Yatai's acquisition of a Thai airline.<sup>74</sup> This impression is supported further by charges brought against the Thai-Asia Association president, Li Shengjiao, though he has denied accusations of criminal activity.



The KK Park cyber scam complex near the Thai-Myanmar border. Cyber scam centres in the region have been blamed for defrauding Chinese and other victims. A senior Thai official has been connected with KK Park. © Lillian Suwanrumpha/AFP via Getty Images

In 2024, Li Shengjiao became implicated in a meat smuggling scandal that the Thai Department of Special Investigation (DSI) alleged had been running since 2019.<sup>75</sup> This reportedly involved ‘over 10,000 shipping containers of meat valued at approximately 6–7 billion Baht [US\$186–217 hundred million]’, with the charges against Li including ‘tax evasion, Customs Act violations related to the import of animals and carcasses, and money laundering’.<sup>76</sup> According to officials at the Ministry of Agriculture, ‘the illegal shipments originated from supermarkets in Brazil and some countries in Europe, where regulations require frozen meat to be destroyed after a year in storage’. Instead, they were transported to be sold in several countries, including Thailand.<sup>77</sup> According to Thai coverage, investigations related to the case are ongoing.<sup>78</sup> The overlap between the various networks listed above complicates Thai-Asia Association’s profile for the period covered.

## The Thai interface

In coverage of the scandal involving Wang Yicheng, reports claimed that the Thai-Asia Association had forged links with some prominent Thai officials.<sup>79</sup> These included key officials from the Thai Police, including the Bangkok division of the cybercrime police.

Ostensibly philanthropic activity by the association is not unprecedented for organizations of this nature, although the patterns of donations and support make interesting reading. Examples include outbreak control materials donated to police during the COVID-19 epidemic and financial support provided to police for meeting room renovations in 2021.<sup>80</sup> Since its inception, the association has in fact developed extensive relations with prominent Thai individuals, mostly officials, a list of whom feature on the organization’s website.<sup>81</sup> Many of the linkages go beyond mere attendance at association events, with some senior Thai anti-cybercrime police serving as honorary advisors to the association, while Li Shengjiao became an advisor to the Thai police cybercrime division.<sup>82</sup>

The association’s philanthropic work often brings the group into contact with Thai military figures. A response to floods in 2019 involved cooperation with military personnel, as well as government and local officials.<sup>83</sup>

When considered alongside the party-state linkages, these Thai connections suggest the organization is a crucible for interaction between the two sides. This positioning is particularly important given the sectors in which the Thai-Asia Association maintains these links and the overlap with wider Chinese party-state objectives.

## Reflections

The Thai-Asia Association case study reveals some overlap between networks associated with the Chinese party-state United Front System and networks that may be tied to criminality. There is documentation that supports Thai-Asia involvement with various United Front System groups, both in terms of staff profiles and interactions through official meetings. Likewise, links to individuals involved in criminal activity have also been described above. Crucially, the association has also developed linkages with various prominent Thai individuals and institutions, many in positions of considerable power.

In this context, the specific areas in which the association is most active are important data points. The evidence above reveals significant overlap with several critical Chinese party-state objectives in the country. These include, for example, an association with Thai police, particularly in the cybercrime realm. Cooperation in this area is included in the China-Thailand joint statement, discussed above.

That same statement also highlights priorities around agriculture and e-commerce, both areas where the Thai-Asia Association has cultivated strong networks in Thailand. Bilateral priorities include 'mutually beneficial cooperation between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and ... [to] ensure quality implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)',<sup>84</sup> both listed explicitly in Li's statement on the Thai-Asia Association's founding purposes, also discussed above.

This pattern continues beyond the examples here. In 2022, Li Shengjiao spoke to United Front's All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese in his capacity as leader of the association. In the article on the event that followed, it is reported that Li stated 'cross-border e-commerce between China and Thailand is booming', talking up 'agricultural and economic and trade cooperation' while declaring that 'as a landmark project in the high-quality joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative between China and Thailand, the China-Thailand railway will promote closer economic and trade relations between the two countries'. This final assertion fits neatly with the party-state's geostrategic China-Laos-Thailand corridor priority.<sup>85</sup>

That an ostensibly small economic interest group champions interests that correlate with its country of origin is not revelatory. In this instance, however, the criminal element in the overlapping networks could suggest another layer to understanding foreign criminal interference in the region. The documented staff overlaps and interlinkages with various United Front System groups seem to suggest implicit state tolerance at minimum. The case study does not indicate close party-state management of the actors and organizations involved, but the recorded features do correlate with systemic geocriminality. Tolerance and indirect support of criminal actors might effectively be leveraged to 'tilt the table' towards party-state interests as needed, possibly giving criminal actors a degree of cover and agency to advance foreign criminal activity, so long as they remain on the right side of the party-state's own cost-benefit analysis.

This state posture results in groups with mixed profiles that combine the licit and illicit. It also means that groups of this nature regularly seek to serve the party-state to better secure their own position. In the case of Thai-Asia, the case study demonstrates what seems to be significant overlap in what is effectively a criminal network in the case of the Hongmen hub that was operating in Thailand. At the same time, the group was attempting (with some success) to carve itself out a facilitator role between China and Thailand at the service of the party-state. Groups with similar characteristics are a logical outcome of the Chinese party-state's relationship with criminal elements, principally its selective enforcement and sporadic support.

## The Philippines

Overlapping maritime claims have been a central feature of the Sino-Philippine relations over the last decade and beyond. Chinese party-state objectives were significantly affected by the 2016 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) arbitration ruling on historic rights and maritime entitlements in the South China Sea. The tribunal found that 'the vast majority of the resources in the southern part of the South China Sea belong to the coastal states: the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and Vietnam'.<sup>86</sup> Subsequent to this ruling, China's top strategic priority has been to discredit the court ruling and to encourage the government of the Philippines to set aside its findings. China has also pressed for the Philippines to limit strategic interactions with the United States and to erode the US-Philippines military alliance.



A Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic resources' aircraft seen above a Chinese coast guard ship on patrol near Chinese-controlled Scarborough Shoal in disputed waters of the South China Sea. Conflicting maritime claims have been a resounding feature of Sino-Philippine relations in recent years. © Ted Aljibe/AFP via Getty Images

Throughout the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, China's approach aimed to sideline the UNCLOS ruling by placing a heavy emphasis on trade and the economy. Central to Beijing's strategy was a focus on party-to-party cooperation, with the CCP signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with then President Duterte's PDP-Laban, as well as establishing a China-Philippines Political Parties Belt and Road Consultation Mechanism.<sup>87</sup> At the outset of the Duterte Administration, China pledged over US\$24 billion in investments to the Philippines, including US\$9 billion in soft credit, and a series of major infrastructure deals.<sup>88</sup> While these projects were slow to materialise, they were repeatedly promoted by both the Chinese and Philippine governments.

A second key strategic objective for China in the Philippines relates to suppressing the activities of the Chinese offshore online gambling and scam syndicates that have made the country a hub since the mid-2000s. According to one estimate, by 2016, there were over 80,000 foreign nationals – largely Chinese nationals – in the Philippines, operating offshore online gambling platforms explicitly targeting China.<sup>89</sup> Adjacent to these operations, illegal underground money transfer services had been established to move large volumes in Chinese currency offshore, generating concerns in China related to rising capital outflows.

This case study reveals tensions between the two central party-state aims in the Philippines vis-à-vis foreign criminal activity. Attempts to push relations towards economic interests rather than the UNCLOS ruling prompted China to heavily involve its business actors. In the context of Beijing's systemic geocriminality approach, in which criminal elements are tolerated and selectively supported by the party-state, the involvement of business actors has also created an opening for criminal activity. Just as those individuals are well-placed to advance Beijing's influence according to changing conditions, they naturally have their own interests in the dubious offshore online gambling sector that Beijing sought to curtail.

## The Case of Michael Yang

Michael Yang (杨鸿明) was born in Fujian, China, in 1976 and moved to Davao City, Philippines around 1997. There he established ties with Duterte, then mayor of the city, engaging in the development of a shopping mall known as the DCLA. According to testimony later filed with the International Criminal Court (ICC) in its case against Duterte, the two formed a close relationship which saw Yang quickly become one of the most influential members of the Chinese business community in the country.<sup>90</sup> (Yang has not been charged as part of those proceedings.)

Throughout the 2000s, Yang established over 50 companies across the Philippines, joining multiple Chinese business associations and positioning himself as a key 'broker' between Chinese state-owned enterprises and the Philippines. Key deals advanced by Yang included the establishment of a China-Philippines Special Economic Zone known as the 'Techno-Industrial Zone'. Positions held by Yang included the Chair of the Philippine-Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Davao, the Honorary Chair of the Davao Chapter of the Yang Clan Association of the Philippines, honorary member of the China-Philippines Friendship Club and 2017 delegate to the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese.<sup>91</sup>

Yang's profile suggests he was a 'role shifter', cultivating various profiles across licit and illicit realms.<sup>92</sup> He cultivated a public image of an entrepreneur and philanthropist. At the same time, testimony to the ICC identified him as operating within a transnational criminal network allegedly involved in narcotics, money laundering, offshore gambling, fraud and other cybercrimes. Yang refuted these claims.<sup>93</sup>

Based on records submitted to the ICC proceedings, Yang's involvement in criminal activity started with the establishment of a network of meth labs across Davao in the early 2000s. Funds from these illegal activities were laundered through real estate and into the establishment of Yang's business interests in the country. As Yang consolidated his relationship with Duterte throughout the 2010s, he became a critical source of financing for Duterte's Presidential campaign, ultimately leading to Yang's appointment as Presidential Economic Advisor in 2016. Yang's key position allowed him to rapidly expand his business activities, while also placing him at the centre of China's moves to advance its strategic interests in the country. Yang's companies became involved in government procurement, including medical supplies during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>94</sup> They also became central to the development of the Philippines Offshore Gambling Operators (POGOs), which were provided a formal legal framework under Duterte.

## Yang and the United Front

As in the Thai case study, research in the Philippines uncovered proximity to the United Front System. Yang wasted no time capitalizing on Duterte's successful Presidential bid to position himself as a 'gatekeeper' between China and the Philippines. In particular, he leveraged ties back to his hometown of Jinjiang, Fujian. Yang has also played a prominent role in Jinjiang related events – the familial origin of many Chinese-ethnicity Philippine citizens.

In 2019, for example, he took the role of officiating guest at a Jinjiang event celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China alongside members of the CPPCC, ministers of the United Front Work Department and the honorary President of the Philippine China Peaceful Reunification Promotion Association.<sup>95</sup> As in the Thai case, Yang's example involves significant philanthropy. The Jinjiang United Front WeChat account reported an eight million CNY donation to support Jinjiang's development, with Minister of UFWD, Huang Wenfu, thanking Yang and commending 'local figures at home and abroad' for the commitment to their hometown.<sup>96</sup>



During the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte (shown here on an election banner), China aimed to sideline the UN's maritime ruling against it by focusing on cooperation and trade with the Philippines. © Dondi Tawatao via Getty Images

As well as serving as an active member of heritage-based engagement efforts of the Chinese party-state in the Philippines, Yang was reportedly involved in brokering meetings between officials from the Philippine government and CCP officials from Fujian, including meetings connected to China's stated objectives in the country.<sup>97</sup> Various Chinese sources (including the two nations' 2018 Joint Statement)<sup>98</sup> highlight the importance of infrastructure projects in the Philippines to China, with special emphasis placed on rail as in other country cases studied in this report. Examination of the itinerary of China Railway Group Limited (CREC) Executive Director Zhang Zongyan for his trip to the Philippines in 2017 shows that he took the time to meet with Yang during his visit.<sup>99</sup> Likewise, Lu Bo, General Manager of the international business department of China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC), visited the Philippines, meeting both the Chinese ambassador and Yang.<sup>100</sup> Lu used the visit to advance CREC's work in the Philippines. The CREC consortium later secured the contract for Package One of the Philippine National Railways (PNR) South Long-Haul Project (though later Chinese involvement would dissolve amid worsening relations, a party-state retreat from multiple projects, and China's step back from some international infrastructure financing).<sup>101</sup>

The 2017 All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese gathering is of particular note in this context. This platform 'is a peak United Front body for ethnic Chinese with overseas links' and firmly associated with Chinese party-state influence activity.<sup>102</sup> In Chinese-language coverage, Yang is quoted explaining that 'every Chinese businessman must always keep the interests of the motherland as their primary concern and take it as their responsibility to promote national economic development'.<sup>103</sup>

Alongside longer-term affiliations, Yang took on further China-linked roles under Duterte. Yang, along with business partner Allan Lim (discussed below), was able to 'secure lucrative business contracts, broker deals for major capital investments, partner with Chinese state-owned enterprises, and take key roles in associations devoted to China's Belt and Road Initiative'.<sup>104</sup>

## **Duterte's pivot on China and the South China Sea**

Duterte personally credited Yang as laying the groundwork for both economic relations between China and the Philippines throughout his administration, and also for the broader foreign policy towards China.<sup>105</sup> While Yang has repeatedly denied being an 'agent' of the Chinese Communist Party, as well as any involvement in the foreign policy of the President, multiple members of the Philippines Senate noted the strong 'coincidence' between Yang's rise in influence and the sudden softening of the Philippines' position on China.<sup>106</sup>

Under Benigno Aquino III's term (2010–2016), the Philippines took a strong stance in defence of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the face of China's 'nine-dash line' claims in the South China Seas. As a key pillar of this strategy, Aquino boosted security ties with the United States and expanded relations with Japan to further counter Chinese influence.<sup>107</sup> This resulted in a serious standoff at Scarborough Shoal in 2012, when China deployed significant numbers of fishing boats in the Shoal's waters and then proceeded to use maritime surveillance vessels to prevent the Philippines from boarding and inspecting them. After a prolonged impasse, the Philippines brought the case to The Hague in 2013, eventually leading to an historic decision in October of 2016 in favour of the Philippines that provides the context for this case study.

The decision to bring the case to The Hague and the victory it generated were hailed as the most distinguishing features of the Aquino presidency. Notably though, in the 2016 Presidential campaign, the issue of The Hague's decision and relations with China were not a major focus for Duterte. Instead, he only began seriously shaping a China policy after taking office in June 2016. Almost immediately after the court decision in October of that year, Duterte travelled to China and during that trip held a meeting with Yang. Going further back, more than six months before Duterte won the election, Michael Yang's network in Fujian had already established close ties with him, hosting him in Xiamen at the offices of his Fudesheng Finance company in late 2015, around the time Duterte announced his presidential campaign.<sup>108</sup>

## **POGOs and criminal networks**

According to media reports, Yang was involved in serious criminality throughout the same period he maintained affiliations with the United Front and overseas influence networks.<sup>109</sup> These allegations came from a former anti-narcotics police officer in an intelligence report and a former member of Duterte's infamous 'Davao Death Squad' in testimony submitted to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Accusations of Yang's apparent link to illicit drugs in the Philippines were further strengthened by his own long-standing connection to Allan Lim, discussed separately below.

Yang's alleged links to narcotics eventually became a hot political topic given his proximity to the president.<sup>110</sup> The aforementioned intelligence report 'documented a network of Chinese businessmen with close ties to Duterte that operated Mindanao meth labs' and explicitly linked Yang to illicit drug production.<sup>111</sup> Its author was Eduardo Acierto, then a retired police colonel who had previously worked as an anti-narcotics operative for more than 15 years. He alleged that the 'Philippine National Police ignored [the report's] findings and blocked further investigations into Yang's alleged drug links'.<sup>112</sup>

Three years later, in testimony submitted to the ICC, Arturo Lascañas, the aforementioned former police officer who claims to have been a member of Duterte's infamous 'Davao Death Squad', 'repeatedly names Duterte associate Michael Yang as the coordinator of a network of methamphetamine labs in Mindanao in the early 2000s'. The evidence in his affidavit is considered an 'independent corroboration

of the detailed claims in [the prior] intelligence report', though Yang rejected the accusations, saying that no evidence had been submitted to any government authority to substantiate the allegation and that he had faced any criminal charges.<sup>113</sup>

Against the backdrop of this evidence, a 2024 Quad-Committee hearing in the House of Representatives explored the alleged criminal activity of Yang and business partner Allan Lim. Senior Deputy Speaker Aurelio Gonzales Jr. and Deputy Speaker David Suarez alleged that what they discovered constituted a 'serious threat to our national security and to our very sovereignty as a nation', given Yang and Lim's position as foreign nationals within a well-placed criminal network. The hearing identified 'a criminal enterprise... operating with quiet impunity' involved in 'human trafficking, kidnapping, prostitution, murder, love scams, crypto scams, and all kinds of cyber scams'.<sup>114</sup>

Deputy Speaker Suarez further alleged that Yang and Lim's legitimate businesses were used as fronts for illicit activity. For example, Yang's DCLA shopping mall was described as a hub for his drug distribution network.<sup>115</sup> Citing connections between the criminal network and Philippine offshore gaming operators (POGOs) – long considered significant security concerns – Suarez 'warned that the alleged criminal syndicate has already extended its reach into the country's national security and sovereignty', risking foreign criminal interference.<sup>116</sup> The inquiry examined corporate structures, company ownership and birth certificates. Over nearly two months, investigators revealed instances of 'corporate layering' through which Yang and Lim were traced to various companies involved in illegal offshore gaming. This was enabled by the use of Philippine citizens as nominees 'to conceal corporate ownership' (identified as Gerald Cruz, Jayson Uson and Yugin Zheng).<sup>117</sup>

This network included Pharmally Pharmaceuticals Inc., the group at the centre of the Covid-19 procurement scandal and Baofu Land Development Corp, which was previously owned by former Bamban mayor, Alice Guo.<sup>118</sup> Guo was at the centre of one of the largest scandals in the Philippines' political history when she was linked to a compound where a raid discovered 'almost 1,000 workers, including victims of human trafficking, and evidence of financial scams ... [as well as] luxury villas, expensive cognac and wines, tortoises, high-end cars and a large swimming pool'.<sup>119</sup> It was later revealed that her birth certificate had been registered only when she was 17 years old and that information she had provided about her background appeared to be false.<sup>120</sup> In the scrutiny that followed, the Philippine's National Bureau of Investigation's (NBI) announced that Guo's fingerprints matched exactly those of a Chinese national who first entered the country in 2003 under the name Guo Huaping, prompting extensive speculation about her background and possible connections to Chinese party-state influence operations.<sup>121</sup>

The links between Michael Yang, his network, and his involvement in China's overseas influence activity and criminality align, in some respects, with other findings, for example in the Thai case. In case studies that reveal what the system is capable of *in extremis*, one again observes a Chinese party-state system in which criminality can flourish so long as it aligns with party-state interests. The Philippine case may go beyond that. Unverified reports on Rappler allege that political rallies supporting Duterte and his family received backing from POGOs associated with Michael Yang's networks.<sup>122</sup> The Rappler article describes the claim as 'reliable information that was credibly gathered, but must be attributed anonymously'. Because Rappler's sources are not made public, this information must be treated with caution, but its publication on a respected platform should be noted. While evidence presented across the case points towards conditions consistent with systemic geocriminality, the Rappler allegations highlight the inherent risk in such conditions.

## The network: Allan Lim

Michael Yang's case includes references to his business partner, Allan Lim (林伟雄). Examining Lim's profile provides further insight into the network and its characteristics within what is an often opaque research landscape. Lim is allegedly one of the most prominent foreign criminals in the Philippines associated with narcotics and human trafficking. His links to criminality appear to be more explicit than Yang's and, similarly, his activity in the Philippines eventually became a prominent political issue. Also like Yang, the extent of his links to the Chinese party-state's official realm was not widely recognized, as OSINT research into the Sinosphere below demonstrates.

Lim and Yang have cooperated on many ventures. As scrutiny increased following the Pharmally scandal, the spotlight was also turned onto Lim since he was a Pharmally executive. Shortly after Pharmally had secured its first Covid-related contracts, Lim and Yang jointly acquired US\$21 million of real estate in Dubai.<sup>123</sup>

Initial Profile of Drug Personality			
UNIT		SCU 3	
Name/Alias	WEN LI CHEN aka @Allan Lim, aka @Ayong (with possible true Chinese Name: Lin Wei Xiong)		
Last Known Address	For verification		
Group Affiliation	WEN LI CHEN Drug Trafficking Syndicate		
Position	For verification		
Criminal Activity	Financing and facilitating the importation, transshipment and local distribution of imported Meth or Shabu, CPCCs and Laboratory Equipments		
Area Of Operation	- Philippines and other countries (for verification)		
Criminal Case Number	TG-4382-03		
Issuing Court	Cavite RTC Branch 18		
Remarks	Case was dismissed due to non-observance of Sec 21 of the Republic Act (marking of evidence and chain of custody rule) Failure of the Prosecution to present morally convincing evidence		
Identifying Mark	None		
Date of Birth	For verification	Educational Background	For verification
Marital Status	For verification	Height	For verification



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The 2017 intelligence report that alleged Yang's logistical role in the illicit drug trade also identifies Lim, explaining that he and Lim worked together in the early 2000s operating Mindanao meth labs.<sup>124</sup> Lim's name later became synonymous with illicit drugs in the Philippines, with the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency's (PDEA) chief Moro Lazo stating, 'he is a drug personality ... he was caught in a shabu [methamphetamine] laboratory in Tagaytay in 2004'.<sup>125</sup> In 2024, it was revealed that Senator Christopher Bong Go had been on friendly terms with Lim, and the senator was obliged to respond that he was not involved in illegal drugs.<sup>126</sup>

An image taken from a 2017 intelligence report submitted as testimony to the International Criminal Court showing Allan Lim. Photo: Lian Buan, Rappler, PDEA chief: Pharmally's Lin Weixiong is in our drug intel, 7 November 2024, <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/pdea-chief-pharmally-lin-weixiong-in-drug-intel-november-2024/>

Given the allegations surrounding Lim's involvement in illicit drugs, the extent of his engagement with Chinese official bodies is surprising. In addition to images from the 2017 intelligence report, he was photographed attending a Belt and Road Summit in Hong Kong in his official capacity as a director of the Philippine Silk Road International Chamber of Commerce.<sup>127</sup> The summit is notable given its strategic importance to China. Xie Feng, the commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Hong Kong at the time and former PRC ambassador to Indonesia, explained to attendees at the event that, under the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, his office would use the connections and information resources of Chinese embassies and consulates to work with countries and regions along the Belt and Road route.<sup>128</sup>

Going back to Yang and Lim's partnership within the context of Philippine politics, in 2016, the two (as well as some other associates) began establishing the network of companies examined later in the aforementioned Quad-Committee hearing. This begins with Xionwei Incorporated in June 2016, which became a Philippine offshore gaming operator (POGO) in 2018. The network subsequently expanded to include Pharmally, central to the following procurement scandal.<sup>129</sup>

As pressure began to mount on Yang and Lim amid the Pharmally procurement controversy, Duterte publicly defended Yang, arguing that he had helped him strengthen relations with China.<sup>130</sup> He also questioned whether China would have allowed the Philippines to transact with Yang if he had been

involved in illegal drugs, adding that Yang maintained close ties with former Chinese Ambassador Zhao Jianhua.<sup>131</sup>

## Reflections

By examining the networks and entities connected to Michael Yang, this case raises important questions about the nature of foreign criminal interference in South East Asia, reflecting some of the findings already revealed in the Thai case. Yang is shown to have extensive links to Chinese party-state United Front organizations and is the subject of multiple accusations relating to serious criminality made by an array of compelling sources. While there are notable differences compared to the Thai case (the state embeddedness of a foreign criminal actor like Yang, for example), many of the same dynamics are present – most notably, those associated with systemic geocriminality. The networks examined do not show direct state micromanagement, but rather a system in which criminality (even very serious criminality) is tolerated so long as the actors and organizations involved generate benefit for the party-state. This apparent acceptance of criminal actors in the United Front System is a notable finding in the context of increasing alarm around state instrumentalization of criminal elements.

The case also hints at something beyond systemic geocriminality. Two months after the Quad Committee hearing on Yang's alleged criminality, Senator Risa Hontiveros told colleagues that Yang was 'a central character in Chinese intelligence operations in the Philippines'.<sup>132</sup> Importantly, Yang's engagement with party-state's overseas influence networks persisted long after his alleged criminality came to light. In 2023, for example, visits to the Philippines by a Fujian provincial delegation and the Quanzhou city delegation involved Yang and were reported alongside not only references to the Maritime Silk Road, but also the BRI and party-state messaging encouraging participants to 'tell China's story well'.<sup>133</sup>

This case also reveals some of the mixed consequences of an approach by Beijing to tolerate and occasionally support criminal elements in the pursuit of objectives abroad. Allowing players like Yang to participate suggests that the Chinese party-state is ideally placed to benefit rapidly from changing conditions in other states (such as a change of leader). At the same time, engaging with criminal networks can also generate inconvenient outcomes for China. Yang appears to have played a role in a wider shift in the Philippines, under Duterte, away from confrontation in the South China Sea and towards a more business-aligned China approach. However, the same conditions that might have allowed Beijing to benefit from Yang's prominent position may have also damaged its objectives on POGOs and capital outflows. Just as Yang's strategic position seems to have left him well-placed to influence the Philippines' China policy, he was likely also in a position to influence policy on POGOs, where he and his network appear to have held substantial interests that clashed significantly with Beijing's own aims. Understanding these tensions is important to understanding more serious foreign criminality in the region.

## Malaysia

China's interests in Malaysia are more nuanced than those in other ASEAN maritime states. Even though Malaysia has been less forceful than the Philippines in rejecting China's nine-dash line in the South China Sea, it has responded by strengthening multilateral cooperation to counter China's tactics, especially in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).<sup>134</sup> In this regard, China has an interest in encouraging Malaysia to engage bilaterally on the Code of Conduct (CoC)<sup>135</sup> and in limiting cooperation with the

US and other Western powers. Economically, China has interests in planned mega-projects such as the East Coast Rail Line and expanding the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park, which is backed by a consortium of Chinese state-owned enterprises and aims to consolidate connectivity between China's western provinces and ASEAN. China is also deepening investments in data centres, exerting growing economic influence over Kuala Lumpur while seeking to bypass Western blockades and broaden the market for Chinese technology applications.<sup>136</sup>

Similar to the Philippines, the Chinese government has maintained a long-term interest in suppressing offshore online gambling and telecommunication fraud targeting Chinese nationals.<sup>137</sup> The challenges China faces in regard to Malaysia differ from those in the Philippines. In Malaysia, the casino industry is dominated by ethnic Chinese Malaysians,<sup>138</sup> including local organized crime groups.<sup>139</sup> Despite the fact such actors from China have sought to cooperate with and penetrate these groups,<sup>140</sup> they have not been able to break into the upper echelons of these criminal networks, nor have they managed to consolidate significant shares in the country's most significant casinos and casino hubs.<sup>141</sup> In fact, ethnic Chinese Malaysian capital networks have successfully consolidated significant positions in emerging casino activities in highly unregulated markets like Cambodia.<sup>142</sup>

Unlike the cases of Thailand and the Philippines, where Chinese transnational criminal actors and other grey business figures have consolidated positions of power and influence vis-à-vis local elites, domestic criminal actors featured more prominently. While figures associated with Broken Tooth's transnational organized criminal network have attempted to build webs of influence through Malaysian officials,<sup>143</sup> the 'Michael Yang' types of figures prominent in the Philippines – Chinese nationals that have established influence with local political elites taking on positions of power and influence – do not appear in the local landscape.

In Malaysia, Chinese party-state United Front activity often involves local Malaysian networks with deep clan ties and influence back in China. Many such figures have taken on prominent roles within China-oriented associations that have become vocal in promoting Chinese strategic ambitions in the country, particularly related to geostrategic economic projects as well as the South China Sea. Some of these players have maintained relatively discreet profiles and play a bridging role for Chinese business and political actors in the country. Others have deliberately built and exploited personality cults around themselves to perpetrate sophisticated financial crimes between China and Malaysia. As we explain in more detail below, figures at the centre of such schemes include Nicky Liow and Jho Low. Of these figures, Jho Low is reported in the media to have played a significant role in advancing Chinese economic interests in Malaysia, while also inflicting substantial harm to Malaysia's sovereign economic interests.<sup>144</sup> Nicky Liow, meanwhile, allegedly attempted to build a web of corruption across Malaysia, including by establishing links to the leader of a major and highly connected figure in Chinese criminal networks, Wan Kuok-koi.<sup>145</sup>

Although both individuals are ethnic Chinese Malaysians, they have been involved in extensive cross-border criminality between China and Malaysia. Both also appear to have maintained ties with various networks in China, including key actors involved in Chinese influence operations. In the case of Nicky Liao, these links had consolidated by 2020 to a point where the Hunan Provincial UFWD actively promoted his contributions to development and poverty reduction in the province.<sup>146</sup> The Malaysian case study examines these figures, the surrounding Chinese networks, and the actors involved in influence operations connected to them, through the lens of geocriminality.

## Jho Low: connected and compromised conman advances China's Belt and Road Initiative

Jho Low was central to the misappropriation of USD\$4.5 billion from Malaysia's sovereign wealth fund from 2009 to 2015. This fund, known as the 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), was directly managed by the country's then (and now incarcerated) President Najib Razak. Low, who had developed close ties with Najib leading up to his election as president, took on a key role in setting up and ultimately managing the fund. The crimes of Najib and Low extended across several jurisdictions, but focused in particular on the United States, China, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Educated in the United States, Low cultivated ties with leading US brokerage and financial institutions, including Goldman Sachs, whose executives were later implicated in laundering funds siphoned from the 1MDB fund. Ironically, some of these funds were reportedly channelled into the financing of a Hollywood film depicting the excesses of Wall Street.<sup>147</sup>

Given his close connections to political elites in Malaysia as well as his influence in financial circles in the United States, Low also attracted significant attention from elites in China. Based on media reports as well as court records from the United States and Kuwait, Low targeted Chinese state-owned enterprises as a means of 'recovering' the funds misappropriated from 1MDB.<sup>148</sup> This involved China's coveted East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project, which Low played a key role in negotiating.<sup>149</sup> He allegedly also requested the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), involved in the project, to inflate project costs to help cover up the 1MDB scandal. Low was further rumoured to have established close ties with senior Chinese party and even police officials, including the former and now disgraced police chief Sun Lijun.<sup>150</sup>



*Equanimity*, a luxury yacht that Malaysian businessman Jho Low allegedly bought with money embezzled from a Malaysian sovereign wealth fund. The fund was managed by the country's imprisoned former president Najib Razak. © Ore Huiying via Getty Images

Low's life of luxury and excess caught up with him in 2015 when a British publication exposed the details of the missing 1MDB funds, and the fact that Low had allegedly transferred over USD\$700 million of those funds into a personal bank account of then Prime Minister Najib.<sup>151</sup> This news caused immediate challenges for the Najib government, leading to investigations involving law enforcement from the US, Malaysia, Singapore, Luxemburg and other countries. This seems to have prompted a significant shift in the posture of the Najib government towards China in 2016, as he leaned on Low to broker a set of infrastructure projects long sought by the Chinese government, but on highly questionable terms. Najib's own trial testimony in 2019 revealed a USD\$34 billion deal to bail out the 1MDB involving two pipelines and the ECRL project.<sup>152</sup> This deal was made by the Najib government in desperation to prevent 1MDB from unravelling and exposing massive levels of corruption with global implications.

By mid-2016, Low had finalised the deal with authorities in Beijing and, according to documents leaked by the Malaysian Parliament to media in 2016, the deal deliberately inflated the cost of the project by 120–140 per cent so as to absorb the 1MDB debts.<sup>153</sup> Despite serious resistance from parliamentarians, the projects went ahead, with China's state-owned CCCC initiating construction on the railroad line in 2017. This, however, failed to save Najib, who, largely due to the scandals, performed pitifully in the 2018 elections.<sup>154</sup> This loss and the rapid progress of international criminal processes into the 1MDB scandal ultimately resulted in the Malaysian police issuing an arrest warrant for Low in 2018.<sup>155</sup> Low promptly absconded, with numerous media reports as well as Malaysian court documents all indicating that he continues to hide in China, possibly under official Chinese protection.<sup>156</sup>

Low has consistently denied any wrongdoing, including advancing claims that he was targeted for political reasons, that he did not steal from the 1MDB Fund, and that he was not involved in money laundering. This is despite the fact that the US, Malaysia, Kuwait and authorities in other countries have continued to maintain charges, which Low has failed to appear in court to contest.<sup>157</sup> Most recently, Low attempted to request a presidential pardon in the US. While this request is not public, officials from the US and Malaysia have given statements to media expressing their lack of interest in or outright rejection of a pardon.<sup>158</sup>

As with the other case studies, the example of Jho Low and the 1MDB scandal indicate the extent to which the Chinese government will engage with criminal actors to meet geostrategic objectives. Unlike other cases in this report, the initial focus of Low's criminal activity was in the United States and the Middle East. It was only *after* this scandal placed the Najib government in an extremely compromised position that Low turned to China for a solution. China's involvement in such a deal suggests its willingness to leverage criminal actors for geostrategic gain otherwise unachievable. Not only did the Chinese bailout package deliver China three major geostrategic wins for the Belt and Road Initiative and for its geostrategic economic position in maritime South East Asia, but it also yielded a highly pro-PRC alignment with the Najib government. Besides this, it potentially provided Chinese authorities with intimate details of the involvement of American financial elites in criminal activity in Malaysia.

Even after Najib's electoral loss, the suspension of the projects and the ultimate renegotiation of the railroad and pipeline deals, Chinese state-owned enterprises were still able to continue implementing the projects on reasonable terms. This may not have been achievable if it were not for the willingness of Chinese state actors to cooperate with a highly compromised Najib government and associated criminal activity. The case is also unique in that, rather than the Chinese state proactively cultivating ties with criminal actors, in this case it was the state-embedded transnational criminal actors that proactively sought Beijing's assistance in a desperate attempt to avoid their downfall. Beijing

strategically, and seemingly knowingly, partnered with criminal actors facing active investigations to achieve geostrategic gains. While there are multiple examples of states cultivating ties to questionable individuals and governments, the behaviour adds to the impression of Beijing's fundamentally different approach to criminality. Following Najib's fall, Beijing went a step further, allegedly harbouring Low as a fugitive, seemingly because of the value he might provide in covering up elements of the scandal, but also as he is likely the source of significant criminal evidence related to a wide range of global elites.

### **Nicky Liow: political operator or street criminal?**

A second case considered for this study is that of Nicky Liow, an ethnic Chinese Malaysian who pioneered a series of scams across Malaysia, China and beyond from 2014 until his arrest in 2022.<sup>159</sup> This case was selected due to the involvement of Wan Kuok-koi's Hongmen network, and in contrast to the Jho Low case, as it appeared to involve a more blatant attempt by Chinese criminal organizations to actively cultivate ties with Liow. Albeit a lower profile case, this example is also well documented both locally in Malaysia, in court records and to some extent in international media reports.

Unlike Low, who had the benefit of an elite US education, Liow hailed from a poor, rural background and became involved in violent gang activity at a young age.<sup>160</sup> From 2014 on, Liow became involved in cryptocurrency-related activities and pyramid schemes. In 2015, he registered a company called Winner Dynasty in Malaysia and worked with influencers in Malaysia and China to promote fraudulent financial products. Around 2017, Liow initiated ties with Wan Kuok-koi, the former 14K cartel leader and the founder the Hongmen World Cultural and Historical Association. Known for being a high-profile 'criminal influencer' with strong ties across China, Wan's extensive involvement with Chinese influence operations has been well documented. In 2019, Liow was appointed as deputy chairperson of Wan's Hongmen Association. In the same year, Winner Dynasty played a key role in Wan's launch of the Hong Coin (named after his Hongmen Association) in Malaysia.<sup>161</sup> Reports claim that the Hong Coin scheme netted Wan Kuok-koi and his criminal organization over USD\$100 million in less than one minute after its launch<sup>162</sup>, although it remains unclear whether the scheme was outright fraud or was used to launder illicit casino and scam funds generated by Wan's other criminal activities.

Liow's entry into the Hongmen Association also appears to have put him in contact with numerous elements of Chinese overseas influence operations. From 2017 to 2020, Liow made numerous trips to China taking part in public ceremonies linked to donations to key Chinese party associations in Hunan Province,<sup>163</sup> including in 2020 donations of COVID supplies all across China.<sup>164</sup> These donations seemed targeted at legitimizing and promoting Winner Dynasty across China as a successful company involved in cryptocurrency and blockchain development that could be trusted due to its close ties with Chinese government agencies, as well as its charitable initiatives.

In 2021, just months after the United States sanctioned Wan and his Hongmen Association, Liow became a key target of a police investigation into hundreds of fraud cases across Malaysia.<sup>165</sup> The sudden scrutiny also uncovered dark elements of Liow's past – despite holding an honorific title of Datuk Seri (the equivalent of a British knighthood), investigations revealed that Liow had been involved in gang violence dating back to 2016. Despite being apprehended by Malaysian police in 2022, by 2024, 14 alleged members of Liow's gang had been acquitted, including his brother. For his part, Liow has through his lawyers denied involvement in any criminal activity and pleaded not guilty to the charges against him, claiming that he was known for displaying his wealth.<sup>166</sup> At present, there are no available records regarding the final outcome of his trial, while some unverified social media posts indicate that he is no longer in detention.<sup>167</sup>

Even though Wan Kuok-koi's criminal organization may have benefited from using Nicky Liow as part of its cryptocurrency schemes in Malaysia, Liow himself is somewhat unremarkable in terms of his utility to the various Chinese agencies with which he developed ties from 2019 to 2021. While Hongmen itself has been involved in Chinese influence operations in jurisdictions from Cambodia to Myanmar to Hong Kong, there is little evidence these activities generated benefits for the Chinese state in Malaysia. If anything, Malaysian police investigations into Wan Kuok-koi's network and associated online scam operations have only resulted in embarrassment for the Chinese Communist Party. Contrary to the case of Jho Low, the Liow example demonstrates that criminals with limited political influence can still be brought into the networks associated with Beijing's systemic geocriminality. Although Liow had consolidated some relationships with elites in Malaysia, his police record and the rapid pace of his fall following US sanctions on Hongmen illustrate that he was not a particularly influential or notable actor in the Malaysian political space.

## Reflections

Taken side by side, the two subjects analyzed in this study suggest different modalities of geocriminality. Jho Low's case suggests a more traditional and opportunistic use of politically connected political actors that stood to drive immediate progress vis-à-vis China's geostrategic interests in the country, while also providing the Chinese party state access to intelligence regarding illicit activity that spanned three continents. Low's mysterious disappearance following Najib's political defeat in 2018 also points to Chinese willingness to harbour an international criminal so as to limit fallout from the scandal. Similar to other contexts around the world, China's moves to shield Low might also be considered in light of law enforcement moves elsewhere to gain advantages vis-à-vis intelligence, or potentially as part of a plea deal.

Given his unextraordinary nature, the Nicky Liow case illustrates the inherent disorder and potential risks in a systemic geocriminality approach, particularly where criminal actors amenable to Chinese influence operations can build networks with what appear to be 'rising actors' involved in grey-area operations. Similar dynamics are evident in the Thai case, for example. In Liow's case, it is difficult to identify how the Chinese party state benefitted from the criminal activity. However, the broader scandal that was exposed upon Liow's downfall triggered significant enforcement actions targeting Wan Kuok-koi's Hongmen network.

## Indonesia

The Chinese party-state's approach to Indonesia is shaped by the latter's non-aligned foreign policy. The policy leaves Indonesia 'free and active' in the international arena, while also stimulating debate around the true intentions and the weight of certain diplomatic actions.<sup>168</sup> The South East Asian state cultivated a closer relationship with the US, for example, during the Obama administration, partly due to its military dependence on US equipment and training.<sup>169</sup> Later however, and to much international criticism, Indonesia held joint bilateral military exercises with Russia in the Java Sea at a time when Russia was internationally isolated.<sup>170</sup>

As well as Indonesia's non-alignment, China's general approach to Indonesia is influenced by the country's role as a Global South figurehead and its status as a major country in China's neighbourhood. One strategic objective is China's concerted effort to increase economic engagement, especially in major infrastructure projects, which has created a degree of economic dependence on China.<sup>171</sup>

Academic analysis of China's economic engagement with Indonesia notes that a significant portion 'is concentrated in two sectors: infrastructure and mineral processing'.<sup>172</sup>

Chinese activity in the mining sector has led to concern in Indonesia, ranging from private Chinese citizens alleged illegal gold mining to growing reliance on major Chinese entities in the extracting and processing of rare earths.<sup>173</sup> The wider mining (and associated metals industry) sector itself is an important arena of Chinese-Indonesian engagement vis-à-vis criminal activity. Although companies involved in the sector hail from multiple countries, poor regulatory architecture and entrenched corruption still deter a significant number of major industry players.<sup>174</sup> The sector is also shaped by Indonesia's influential elite military network,<sup>175</sup> which remains an important feature of its political economy, with significant implications for crime prevention. Domestic experts engaged through this project did note, however, that in some areas the historically dominant military networks have been challenged (and in some instances superseded) by police force networks.<sup>176</sup>

Despite obstacles, China has scored some important diplomatic wins, such as Indonesia's formal admission into the BRICS in early 2025 and a joint statement (during Prabowo Subianto's presidency) that ostensibly softened Indonesia's opposition to China's maritime claims within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).<sup>177</sup> Such was the reaction to the latter that the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs later issued a statement denying any acceptance of the Chinese claims. Still, the episode represented a significant and unanticipated development in China's favour.<sup>178</sup>

The Indonesian case study again demonstrates the importance of local factors in shaping how the Chinese party-state approaches overseas engagement. While United Front organizations are active in various sectors in Indonesia, research into this report's central questions led to domestic networks and Chinese engagement through business. Activity in the metallic commodities sector reveals more about the crucible between Chinese party-state, Chinese commercial entities and domestic elite groups. This phenomenon does not identify an explicitly criminal Chinese actor at the centre, as in some of the other cases. In fact, it reveals a Chinese state-linked commercial entity operating in a highly complex grey area permeated with criminal activity by others and associated enabling factors (such as corruption and cronyism). The evidence suggests that this configuration of interests may even extend into the legislative realm, redefining what activity constitutes criminality, to the benefit of local elites, Chinese commercial entity and Chinese party-state.

## **Commercial actors: Tsingshan**

Chinese activity in Indonesia's mining sector is substantial and not limited to nickel, the central subject of this case study. In artisanal gold mining, for example, there are widespread accounts of criminal activity involving Chinese nationals. These cases have been accompanied by allegations of Chinese party-state reluctance to assist Indonesian authorities in criminal investigations.<sup>179</sup>

The activities of Chinese group Tsingshan Holdings Group (青山控股集团有限公司) and subsidiaries in Indonesia (particularly its role as majority owner of Morowali Industrial Park) offer a useful example to better grasp the relationship between Chinese engagement and criminal activity in Indonesia's mining sector – a low-regulation environment.

Tsingshan operates in the metallurgical industry, extracting, processing and producing metals such as nickel and stainless steel. Given its scale, its position within a strategic industry and its international activity, the company is of significant strategic importance for Beijing. It is privately owned, with founder Xiang Guangda (项光达) holding a stake of around 22 per cent.<sup>180</sup> The company

demonstrates considerable alignment with the Chinese party-state, both domestically and internationally. Domestically, it backs various regional development aims, such as major charitable donations in Hunan to support the ‘development of county-level social organizations’.<sup>181</sup> Internationally, the group is often at the vanguard of Chinese party-state activity, for example, meeting political leaders and making investments in Zimbabwe, a crucial ally for Beijing in Africa.<sup>182</sup>

The conglomerate’s activities abroad are supported by state-owned policy banks (that operate to fulfil state policy goals), as well as commercial banking institutions, generally state-owned.<sup>183</sup> When Tsingshan faced severe financial stress in the midst of poor trading decisions, Chinese banks reached agreements that ensured the group’s survival after being ‘directed to co-operate by the Chinese government’.<sup>184</sup>

Further evidence of the depth of the relationship between Tsingshan and the Chinese party-state is evident in state media coverage – a source of importance in the Chinese context. Tsingshan are involved in well-publicized BRI projects, and Chinese state media described Tsingshan’s Morowali Industrial Park as ‘a landmark project of cooperation between China and Indonesia under the Belt and Road Initiative framework’.<sup>185</sup> China’s embassy in Indonesia reveals the importance of Tsingshan within wider party-state activity in the country. China’s former ambassador, Xie Feng, spoke favourably about the company at a ‘Made in Indonesia’ event promoting ‘win-win cooperation’ between the two countries, while his successor, Ambassador Lu Kang, made an official visit to Tsingshan’s Morowali Industrial Park.<sup>186</sup> Cumulatively, these details give the impression of an entity that is firmly embedded in the party-state landscape.



Morowali Industrial Park, a nickel-processing complex in Indonesia. Chinese activity in the country’s minerals sector has led to concern in Indonesia, where relations are shaped by Beijing’s strategic objectives in the realm of extraction and processing. © Dimas Ardian/Bloomberg via Getty Images

## Regulations and criminality

Scrutiny of Tsingshan’s manoeuvring in the Indonesian political economy has raised concerns related to cronyism and conflicts of interest. At an operational level, Morowali Industrial Park has been the subject of investigations related to environmental damage, worker abuse and failure to comply with safety standards.<sup>187</sup>

In 2025, Indonesia’s Environment Ministry reported ‘serious environmental breaches’ at Morowali. These breaches included wastewater and air pollution levels exceeding permissible levels; industry activity taking place beyond the permitted geographical limit; and the discovery of 12 million metric

tonnes of mining residue. Where laws had apparently been broken, Rizal Irawan, deputy for environmental law enforcement, promised that 'we will proceed with a criminal and civil legal process'.<sup>188</sup> There is little evidence of further activity taken by the Environment Ministry. A development in late 2025 added to the impression of widespread law-breaking at the site. It was reported that an illegal airport had been discovered at Morowali, allegedly in use for six years. Planes were found to be regularly using the runway, 'without the routine presence of customs, immigration or AirNav oversight' creating a channel into the country where 'the usual guardrails of state authority sat absent'.<sup>189</sup>

At the Morowali site, there have been various allegations of 'wage withholdings, illegal contracting practices, workplace injuries and deaths, dangerous conditions, [and] abuse'.<sup>190</sup> Several fatalities have occurred at the site. After one incident that killed 21 workers, the Indonesian government found that there were "strong indications" of violations of standard operating procedures and negligence in implementing industrial safety standards'.<sup>191</sup> In 2024, police charged two Chinese nationals with 'negligence leading to death or serious injury'.<sup>192</sup> At the time of writing, there does not appear to be any further update on court decisions.

## The Indonesian interface

Examining Tsingshan's efforts to embed itself locally reveals patterns consistent with other cases in this report. Most notably, the case connects the Chinese company to Indonesia's elite military network and associated corollaries. Tsingshan's local partner for the Morowali Industrial Park was PT Bintang Delapan, owned by Chinese-Indonesian businessman Halim Mina.<sup>193</sup> Crucially, Sintong Panjaitan, a former army general, was appointed as president commissioner of Delapan.<sup>194</sup> Sintong's appointment opens a channel to one of the most important elite networks in Indonesia. Sintong is considered one of 'Luhut's men', referring to Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, a retired four-star army general who served under Sintong.<sup>195</sup> In other sources, Sintong is described as 'Luhut's closest ally'.<sup>196</sup> The network and its positioning speak to the wider issues of military networks in Indonesia, as discussed above, but this report is not making an accusation of criminality against Luhut personally.

Luhut is a formidable political operator who has held several positions in Indonesian politics and has interests in various companies. At the time of writing, he is Chairperson of the National Economic Council, and he previously held the role of Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment.<sup>197</sup> He has also served as President Joko Widodo's Chief of Staff and, like Prabowo Subianto, the current Indonesian president, has a background in Kopassus – the Indonesian special forces.<sup>198</sup> Luhut's relationship with former president Widodo is of particular importance in this case. Luhut is described as Jokowi's 'close confidant' and the two have been linked since at least 2009 when they formed a joint venture between Jokowi's family furniture business and Luhut's Toba Sejahtra group.<sup>199</sup>

Toba Sejahtra serves as an example of Luhut's business interests, in this case controlling a 'number of subsidiaries involved in coal mining and coal-fired power plants', themselves connected to other members of Luhut's family.<sup>200</sup> Luhut reportedly maintained influence over the 'state oil company', Pertamina, which eventually 'relocated its headquarters to Luhut's Toba Sejahtra-owned "Sopo Del" Tower'.<sup>201</sup>

Luhut's position at the intersection of business (particularly in natural resources and electricity) and politics afforded him great opportunities. It also speaks to some of the themes explored in this case, such as the space for criminality among foreign entities in Indonesia vis-à-vis their relationship to domestic elite networks. This dynamic extends into the regulatory sphere. Certain laws were changed

during Luhut's period at the apex of Indonesian politics. For example, he was criticized for his role in the 2020 omnibus bill that reportedly weakened environmental protections and the rights of workers, which favoured his own business interests.<sup>202</sup> Luhut's connection to Tsingshan, arguably the chief beneficiary of this legislation, highlights the dense, complex issues at the heart of the wider phenomenon. Expert commentators noted at the time that a meeting between Luhut and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi came just days after the omnibus bill was passed, suggesting that the bill itself (with its repercussions for criminality in Indonesia) may have been part of a strategy to encourage Chinese investment.<sup>203</sup>

Changes in favour of business in this regard makes it less likely that such behaviour qualifies as 'criminal' to begin with – a complex element of the equation where foreign criminality and elite networks meet. Metal workers were negatively affected by this legislation, and the Federation of Metal Workers (FSPMI) told the media they planned to shut down production to protest the law.<sup>204</sup> The winners, on the other hand, are the domestic Indonesian elite networks (who are invested in the wider supply chain), the Chinese entities operating in the sector (who faced reduced risk of criminal liability) and Chinese party-state (whose interests, such as access to strategic minerals, are entwined with Chinese entities such as Tsingshan). It is impossible to determine whether there was collusion between these groups, but the overlap of interests does raise questions.

## Chinese connections

Beyond these domestic connections, scrutiny of Luhut's profile adds another dimension to the equation, suggesting he has also been one of the most influential voices shaping Indonesia's approach to China. His public contributions on China have not been without controversy, with support for Indonesia's northern neighbour on a range of issues, such as the South China Sea and Chinese worker entry into the country. This has led to the Indonesian press labelling him 'China's agent' and 'the Chinese ambassador'.<sup>205</sup>

Luhut boasts a strong relationship with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi and was also made an honorary professor at Tsinghua, one of China's most prestigious universities.<sup>206</sup> On Wang Yi and the relationship between the two countries, in 2023 one of Luhut's staff members explained to an academic that, 'Luhut's role is essential since he knows Wang Yi personally. Luhut also communicated directly with [Indonesian] President Jokowi'.<sup>207</sup> According to Chinese media coverage, in meetings with Wang Yi, he echoes party-state framing, signalling Indonesian support for China's 'concept of a community with a shared future for mankind'.<sup>208</sup>

Luhut's aforementioned interventions on China-related topics in the national arena have often been timely and significant. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, he strongly supported medical cooperation with China and publicly thanked China's assistance at a time when public perceptions were strained.<sup>209</sup> He also publicly challenged the Indonesian government's National Research and Innovation Agency when it queried whether the influx of Chinese workers was justified by Chinese investment in the country.<sup>210</sup>

On the most contentious issue between the two countries, the South China Sea, Luhut has issued a range of statements, with some attracting domestic criticism for being too conciliatory towards China.<sup>211</sup> In 2015, before the immediate period examined here, US Navy destroyer USS *Lassen* conducted a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea near the Spratly Islands. Coverage of this operation reported that 'Indonesia was possibly the only outlier amongst South East Asian

countries [in criticizing the action] in its response'.<sup>212</sup> Speaking publicly at the time as Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Luhut described the US operation as 'power projection', explaining, 'we disagree, we don't like any power projection'.<sup>213</sup>

## Reflections

While the Indonesian case contains many of the features present in all four countries examined, its dynamics appear closer to Malaysia than Thailand and the Philippines, though each has its own idiosyncrasies. Although Chinese criminals are active in Indonesia, they do not appear to have penetrated the elite political networks as effectively as in some other countries in the region. For that reason, the type of United Front-criminal interface identified in other examples appears less prominent here.

The Tsingshan example, nevertheless, offers evidence of what appears to be unlawful activity linked to a Chinese entity operating abroad, albeit more typically within the realm of criminal negligence and regulatory non-compliance rather than underworld crime types, such as narcotics and money laundering. The case demonstrates overlap between the interests of Chinese commercial entity, party-state and local elites. The evidence also raises the prospect that this configuration may have contributed to legislative changes that benefitted all three. This final point is of particular importance because it goes beyond criminal activity itself, speaking to the very definition of what is considered 'criminal' in the countries where these individuals and organizations are operating.



## CONCLUSION

**E**xtensive research across the four South East Asian countries has revealed a dense, complex and often opaque landscape of power, networks and interests. Understanding foreign criminality in the region, particularly that with state links, requires consideration of broader domestic and international contexts. Two central observations emerge from the findings. First, the evidence suggests a Chinese party-state relationship with crime that differs considerably from China's current efforts to project an image and institutionalize its law enforcement credentials internationally. Second, when this approach encounters local conditions in the four countries examined, it manifests in different ways, often exposing the foreign criminality vulnerabilities particular to that country.

### **Operating at the periphery: the Chinese party-state and foreign criminality**

Taken together, the case studies appear to strengthen the systemic geocriminality hypothesis in relation to Chinese party-state activity linked to criminal elements beyond its borders. There is little evidence of the party-state directly 'deploying' criminals in the manner associated with Russian activity in Europe, for example. However, there is considerable proof of engagement between, on one hand, criminals, and on the other, party-state and United Front System groups. The expansion of the United Front System has in turn broadened this interface, increasing the number and range of people and groups connected and operating abroad and engaging with criminals.

The data suggests these criminals, including notorious ones, attempt to 'play the game' by abiding by the party-state's rules – effectively meaning to stay on the right side of the party's cost-benefit analysis in terms of its interests. In the Philippines, for example, Michael Yang's criminal activities sit starkly beside his involvement in high-level United Front System activity. Even in Malaysia, where Chinese criminals themselves struggled to carve out significant relationships with political elites, this study still detected Hongmen activity through Malaysia's Nicky Liow. One vitally important implication of this research is that countries in the region will need to better understand the criminal dimensions associated with certain United Front System groups (including business and hometown groups, for example).

Systemic geocriminality, in this context, manifests as a licence for United Front actors to – in pursuit of their own objectives – cultivate relationships and develop networks that may include criminal individuals or groups. Beijing's tolerance of certain forms of criminality may yield rewards, with United Front groups well-placed to act as channels amid the political and societal change in the countries in

question. At the same time, that permissive space for dubious relationships can also result in some of the potentially damaging outcomes shown in the case studies, such as the fallout from scandals when exposed.

Examining the criminal actors within the wider context of Chinese party-state activity overseas, one could argue that as with Chinese businesses, a 'latent network' description is apt, as it indicates they are not necessarily micromanaged by Beijing, but that the party-state has massive leverage whenever it chooses to intervene.<sup>214</sup> Chinese businesses, in this sense, exercise autonomy and pursue their own objectives, but remain 'within the gravity of the CCP's influence and on matters the CCP considers important, they are subject to its will, either by legal means or otherwise'.<sup>215</sup> Though not identical, the findings hint at some comparable dynamics in the party-state's relationship with criminals and criminal groups across various cases. While criminals pursue their own aims, they are often operating in a permissive ecosystem where the party-state incentivizes certain behaviour that typically tilts the table towards party-state interests. Furthermore, if said criminal is a Chinese citizen or retains interests in China (for example a business, a bank account, family members), then the party-state retains considerable leverage.

Investigations also highlight some of the risks the Chinese party-state faces when working with criminal actors. As Russia's experience demonstrates, the use of criminal actors as informal facilitators of state interests can generate significant strategic vulnerabilities. In strengthening relationships with criminal elements in Europe amid greater constraints placed in its state agents, Russia had to reckon with issues of competence and loyalty.<sup>216</sup> In this instance, what is true of episodic geocriminality associated with Russia is also true of the systemic geocriminality associated with China.

In the Philippines, for example, Michael Yang and his network have pursued their own interests while maintaining the party-state's backing (due to benefits such as access to the Philippines' political elite). At the same time, these activities have negatively affected other party-state objectives (such as efforts to force action on POGOs). A further pitfall is evident in the Thai case where, like Yang's example, those involved were ultimately exposed. Wang Yicheng was effectively the fall guy for the wider scandal; however, the coverage likely caused embarrassment and showed the cost the party-state may have to bear in different circumstances. The Indonesian case captured quite a different configuration of state and crime shaped by local conditions, most notably the nature of the local criminal networks and their relationship with the state. It did offer, however, some insight as to how Beijing and those in its orbit may be able to mitigate risks of this approach in the future. In that case, evidence hinted at Chinese entity and Indonesian elite collusion to change the law, redefining what is actually considered 'criminal'. Although that outcome arrives here primarily due to elite collaboration involving a Chinese profit-seeking enterprise rather than criminal entity directly, such a strategy could also change the calculus on instrumentalization of criminals.

## **Commonalities and vulnerabilities: foreign criminality in South East Asia**

The outcomes associated with state-linked foreign criminality vary according to territory and local conditions. Some important commonalities exist across case studies, but the discrepancies between cases equally illuminate key features of the landscape.

Even though typically manifested in slightly different ways, elite network compromise was a common story across the cases. Domestic features of each country typically include privileges for political and

economic elite groups. Where foreign criminals associated with those groups, they too can benefit from such privileges. This can mean evading scrutiny, securing better political access and, in general, results in such criminal groups generating a greater impact. The lesson here is that attention to foreign criminal interference must necessarily include analysis of domestic elites.

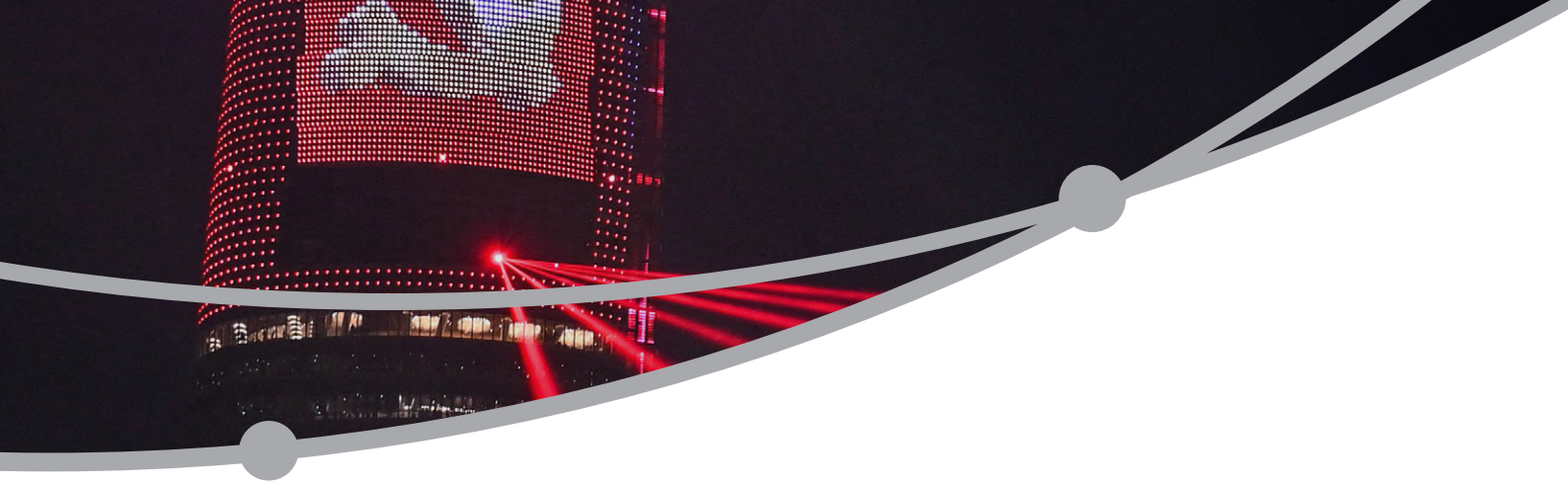
Another common issue was the Chinese party-state approach to Chinese diaspora groups. As explained above, China is actively creating or commandeering various groups tied to hometown identities and business, most commonly as part of the United Front System. In the countries examined, however, there appeared to be limited knowledge of, or little will to address problems connected to the Chinese party-state and, in some cases, overlap with criminal actors. It is also important to note that members of the wider Chinese diaspora may also be imperilled by this approach. Where the states themselves may show little interest in this problem, local people can grow resentful of groups of this nature, particularly where Beijing's hand is apparent.

In terms of resilience, the effectiveness of local law enforcement is an obvious factor in foreign criminality outcomes, as are the position and strength of local criminal networks. In Malaysia and Indonesia, established Chinese criminals operating within those countries had notably less influence than in the Philippines and Thailand. The positioning of local criminal groups, typically close to state power, has made it difficult for Chinese nationality criminals to become established beyond the lower rungs of the state-crime nexus. In Indonesia, for example, entrenched domestic grey-area actors represent a formidable and somewhat impenetrable network. Though willing to engage with foreign groups, the presence of this network makes it difficult for foreign criminal groups to enter the same space. It is not a coincidence that the most notable criminal activity by a Chinese entity in the orbit of Indonesian state power came from a Chinese commercial group rather than a Chinese criminal network.

A common domestic weakness across cases was a lack of resources among state and crime prevention agencies. Outright bribery is typically centred around greed; however, the salary and standing of the police, for example, are also typical factors. In a similar vein, the space opened up through donations (for renovations to police meeting rooms in the Thai case, for example), undoubtedly generates opportunities for foreign criminals to exploit. Limited resources for law enforcement agencies tracking foreign criminality was also raised in the in-country discussions held as part of this project.

Not all of the commonalities across cases relate to vulnerabilities. Where established Chinese criminals did gain some purchase among domestic elites, the efforts of local journalists were at least a contributing (and sometimes leading) factor in their exposure. The Philippine and Thai cases, in particular, demonstrated the value of the fourth estate and other civil society groups in exposing foreign criminality. When combined with heated political debate, which in the cases of the Philippines and Malaysia also demonstrated the importance of opposition parties, the impact was significant.

Finally, the research highlights a growing challenge in distinguishing what is domestic, what is international and what is transnational criminality. Case studies included fraudulent identity documents; transnational conglomerates with locally registered presence; transnational criminal groups with conflicting loyalties; and various other features that challenge both the laws of the land and the definitions employed to analyze such phenomena. Further efforts to curtail foreign criminal interference in the region will need to face up not only to the criminal features identified in this report, but also the growing overlap between foreign, domestic and transnational realms.



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