Europe and Malaysia: Staving Off the Chinese and Russian Narrative Threat

1. Introduction

Amidst the current volatility of the international order, Europe and Malaysia are confronted with the same set of challenges. Both must contend with system-level turbulence, and also face similar exogenous threats to their democracies: the spread of Chinese and Russian narratives. These narratives have permeated the predominantly open and free media landscapes of both Europe and Malaysia alike. Their spread has undermined democratic ideals through disinformation, anti-Western propaganda, and the glorification of authoritarian governance. Naturally, parallels can be drawn from both regions' experiences with these narratives. Yet, the localised situations are not identical and much remains to be learnt comparatively.

Studies point to solid levels of cognitive resilience in Malaysia. They also highlight an ingrained attachment to democratic ideals. The spread of Chinese and Russian narratives is neither unilinear nor identical. Exposure alone is not what guarantees influence over Malaysian geopolitical attitudes. Other layered, mediated and cognitively-structured variables, such as relational proximity, trust, economic reliability and institutional credibility, require acknowledgement.

Be that as it may, Chinese and Russian narratives have gained a foothold in Malaysia. This is due to a combination of the overconsumption of social media platforms and the normalisation of these narratives through trusted domestic news sources. Hence, the gravity of this situation should not be underestimated. Germany and Europe thus need to be more proactive in partnering with Malaysia to find mutually supportive ways of addressing this phenomenon (which similarly afflicts Europe). As this policy paper argues, Germany and Europe need to reinvent their public diplomacy and soft power projections in Malaysia as a means of indirectly neutralising the potency of these narratives.

2. The Threat Superimposition

In this policy paper we'll discuss the following overlapping threats:

- The overexposure of Malaysian social media consumers to dubious news sources and/or outright disinformation
- The infiltration of Chinese and Russian communication strategies within the traditional domestic news media landscape in Malaysia
- The normalisation of subtle messages extolling the virtues of autocratic modes of government, aimed at capitalizing on Malaysian voters' dissatisfaction with democratic outcomes
- This information ecosystem incrementally lending itself to widening dissemination of anti-Western narratives

2.1. Threat of Digital Omnipotence

Much like the rest of the world, Malaysia and its citizens are becoming increasingly dependent on the digitalization of their lifestyles. For all of the upsides of the omnipresence of tech, its potency carries risks. Especially in its capacity for mass manipulation, dissemination of fake content and distortions of the truth.

In a recent survey produced by the Merdeka Centre, social media represents the principal news source for almost half of all respondents, with Facebook and TikTok the most frequently

Dr Benjamin Barton, Head of School of Politics, International Relations & Economics (SPIRE), Associate Professor of International Relations, University of Nottingham Malaysia

cited platforms. This is almost twice as many respondents than those who answered that traditional media platforms constituted their primary source of news. With some respondents reporting consumption on average of up to five hours or more of social media content per day.

This leads to a significant portion of the country's adult population being susceptible to repeated exposure to fake news and other disinformation. This is particularly true for older segments of the adult population and/or those having received less formal education. Their restricted digital literacy makes them more susceptible to such exposure.

2.2. Threat of Narrative Infiltration and Assimilation

The risk of exposure to disinformation can be offset by fact-checking. And indeed, survey data indicate that upon being exposed to fake news, the tendency amongst Malaysians is to resort to trusted domestic media sources to verify the authenticity of content on Instagram, Tiktok or RedNote (Xiaohongshu).

This, however, is wherein the contention lies. There's an innate mistrust of state-sponsored Chinese and Russian media outlets in Malaysia (e.g. China Daily, Xinhua News Agency, RTTV, etc.). However, turning to domestic news sources for verification purposes may not necessarily prevent exposure to these state-sponsored narratives. This is because, as the same Merdeka Centre survey report indicates, Malaysia's information environment allows a wide range of international narratives to circulate.

As has been similarly observed in Germany and other European countries, both China and Russia have benefited from the permissiveness of this landscape. This openness is used to carefully craft influence strategies which weave their respective positive messaging into the domestic news cycle. In turn, this blurs the line demarcating social media disinformation and domestic news source myth-debunking.

The findings of this report show that in China's case, it has consistently sought to cultivate the image of positive, modern, and partnership-oriented country. This self-portrayal is supported by the pervasive and dominant presence in economic and geopolitical matters it is observed as holding regionally. It helps to explain why, according to this report, a majority of respondents not only trust China as an economic partner but are inspired by its development model. A model which does away with political freedoms and pluralism in exchange for the promise of stable economic gains, over which the state has a policy monopoly and where dissent is not tolerated.

As far as Russia is concerned, it too has sought to embed a positive spin of itself within the local news cycle albeit by using a slightly different playbook to China. Instead of weaving attraction on the basis of its socio-economic model, Russia panders to the perception of ideological sameness towards certain Malaysian audiences. This is because, unlike perceptions of China where repeated exposure breeds a degree of receptiveness, the near-absence of exposure to Russia drives it to seek alternative means of garnering influence.

As a case in point, by adhering to the adage 'the enemy of my enemy [US] is my friend,' Moscow seeks to curry favour with local target audiences from across the Malaysian political spectrum. It seeks to exploit an anti-American/West bent, as to distort negative appraisals of itself. Those who subscribe to this worldview locally have subsequently been found reverting to the outputs of Russian media outlets (such as Russia Today) to support their denunciation of Western news sources as propaganda.

By playing to this tune within the domestic media environment, Russia obfuscates rational assessments of global conflicts in which it is either directly implicated (Ukraine) or is not

(Gaza). As has been explained in previous studies, Chinese messaging has also sought to benefit from the amplification of this pro-Russia propaganda. It frames tensions through the lens of US-China rivalry to stir anti-US and pro-Chinese sentiment, particularly among Malaysian Chinese.

2.3. Threat to Malaysian Democracy and Anti-Western Narrative Creep

These findings become more alarming alongside a further realisation. Chinese and Russian strategies may be actively seeking to undermine Malaysia's democratic foundations. They do so through and increasingly hostile campaign against the West and Western political values.

The gap between democratic principles and their translation into effective forms of governance is what has fuelled a disillusionment with democratic processes among some respondents. The frustration outlined by some of these respondents is what can lay the groundwork for susceptibility to 'strongman style' leadership or governance trade-off that sacrifice democratic accountability for perceived stability. As noted elsewhere, Vladimir Putin's popularity among certain segments of Malaysia's netizenry is owed to his strongman appeal derived from his seeming ability to stand up to the West.

This finding is disconcerting when acknowledging that Malaysians seek to verify possible disinformation by reverting to trusted domestic news sources. These are the very environment in which Chinese and Russian media strategies operate freely. Data reveals that 74% of Malaysians trust mainstream media outlets. The risk is particularly acute here in relation to China given how widely its socio-economic model is perceived as appealing. Those already disillusioned with democracy are thus turning to a media environment where positive portrayals of China's authoritarian system are easily accessible and rarely questioned, further deepening that distrust in democracy.

In addition, part of the prerogatives of Chinese and Russian communication strategies lies in bashing Western political ideals and adopting an explicitly anti-Western tone. For example, the Russian Embassy in Malaysia often instrumentalises the anti-colonial card to garner appeal in parallel to debasing the West. At the same time, Russia's intentions are more subliminal since invoking nefarious Western intent serves as a diversionary tactic from its own military transgressions.

This approach seems to be paying dividends: only 18% of survey respondents pointed to Russia as the key instigator behind its invasion of Ukraine, compared to 30% who pointed to the United States. For Europe, this depiction is particularly injurious. Maintaining international opprobrium of Russia's actions is urgent, especially when Washington wavers in its support

Opinions remain equally split on the responsibility behind the MH17 tragedy, where more Malaysian denied and/or expressed uncertainty of Russia's involvement than those who believed in Moscow's collusion. This brings us back to the danger of domestic media co-option. It is unsurprising to find, then, that Cyfluence's report made reference to a Bernama Radio post which omitted reference to the international investigative consensus that MH17 was shot down by Russian-backed separatist forces. Bernama Radio is considered to be one such trusted local news source.

3. Factors of Threat Mitigation

3.1. Cognitive Safeguards and Idealistic Robustness

Dr Benjamin Barton, Head of School of Politics, International Relations & Economics (SPIRE), Associate Professor of International Relations, University of Nottingham Malaysia

These state of affairs, of the health of democracy in a country like Malaysia, and the narrative creep that threaten its wellbeing, do stand on different sides of the spectrum. On the one hand, it raises questions about how deeply embedded the fact-checking reflex truly is among respondents. Particularly when set against local expert assessments of information cross-checking in practice. More depth on the development of analytical capacity, local institutional resilience and regulatory capacity would have only strengthened what is already a highly polished report. On the other hand, this reading also flags Chinese and Russian threats by emphasizing the slickness of the state machinery underpinning the development and implementation of these communications strategies. In open, democratic societies, authoritarian regimes are often given the benefit of the doubt. Their ability to mobilise resources without the constrains of checks and balances can appear deceptively effective. Yet, it has been demonstrated that for all of the sophistication of these autocratic endeavours, the roll-out of their strategies has not always borne fruit in Malaysia. Consequently, the true threat-level lies somewhere in the middle.

The gravity of the Chinese and Russian threat should neither be underestimated nor taken at face value. Not all Malaysians are equal when confronted with disinformation whether found on social media platforms or repurposed via domestic news sources. For all of the vulnerable social groups, others exhibit cognitive resilience. A “large share” of survey respondents still strongly believe in Malaysian democracy and want for it to remain as such, as opposed to gravitating towards a Chinese-style of autocratic governance. Overall perceptions of Russia are more distant and diffuse. They tend to be coloured by a genuine lack of awareness of its living conditions and governance structure. Malaysia remains characterised by low levels of trust in official government media emanating from both China and Russia, while both Merdeka Centre and Cyfluence’s respective reports converge around the recognition that China is held primarily responsible for tensions in the South China Sea.

Although this analysis has led us to these important findings, we must keep reminding ourselves time and time again that ethnicity in Malaysia is neither a sure shot causality for receptiveness to either Chinese and/or Russian messaging, nor does it entail homogeneity of receptiveness and harmonisation of opinion. Other factors need accounting for, which broadbrush ethnic indicators do a poor job at capturing.

For example, can Malaysian Chinese really be considered a unified entity in this context when there are significant variations in income/education levels within this one group alone? Let alone a myriad of identity factors (tied to language, ancestry, sub-ethnicities, religion, schooling, place of residence (peninsular Malaysia vs. East Malaysia) etc.) which are not captured in the surveys. Despite the obvious proximities favouring the receptiveness of Malaysian Chinese to influence campaigns from mainland China, there is also, simultaneously, a long-standing scepticism harboured by this ethnic group towards China. This scepticism draws on collective memories of rejection/displacement (whether long-term or more recent), mainland Chinese othering (overseas Chinese) and the relationship/loyalty to their home, Malaysia.

As the Merdeka Centre’s findings confirm, public perceptions of China and Russia are shaped not only by information exposure but also by personal experience. This approach also overlooks external guardrails such as Taiwanese counter-influence, the dissemination of Falun Gong counter-propaganda, and attachment to the West and/or openness to Western values through professional, educational or filial ties. Not forgetting English-educated families in Malaysia, who inherently inculcate a degree of Western values through practices at home. Given the richness of Malaysia’s ethnic composition, the same remarks could well be levelled at other ethnic groups.

Dr Benjamin Barton, Head of School of Politics, International Relations & Economics (SPIRE), Associate Professor of International Relations, University of Nottingham Malaysia

3.2. From Disinformation and Public Distortion to Policy?

These reports excel in raising another critical point: the relationship between popular mass manipulation and policy shifts favouring China and Russia. Put differently, foreign policy commentary often conflate increasingly favourable public views of China and Russia with favourable policy shifts (that, by default, are detrimental to German and European interests). In their own separate ways, both reports help to throw caution to the wind in relation to this assumption. As a case in point, when factoring in both the example of Malaysia becoming a BRICS partner country in 2024 and its support for the recent UN General Assembly motion on the war in Ukraine. In both cases, the empirical evidence linked to public opinion shifts remains inconclusive.

When a survey questioned respondents about whether Malaysia should associate more overtly with BRICS, the input provided was anything but dogmatic. Whereas a majority of respondents appeared to endorse the government's decision to pursue BRICS membership, a significant number simultaneously baulked at the prospect of crossing the United States in so doing. The fear of straying too far from the politics of equidistance, which sits at the cornerstone of Malaysian foreign policy identity, still overrides the prospect of exclusively identifying with Chinese and Russian spheres of influence. Therefore, even if the government has deemed this an important foreign policy initiative, it was driven for reasons other than popular demand. A similar point applies to the war in Ukraine, where despite some respondents seemingly blaming the United States for Russia's military aggression, Malaysia's official position on the war is in fact more neutral, if not Western-leaning.

3.3 Policy Recommendations: What Needs to Be Done

The complexity of the situation at hand is not unique to Malaysia. A parallel can be drawn between what Malaysia is experiencing and the situation in Europe, where the continent's information environment is being tested by Russian and Chinese disinformation.

For Germany and Europe, both micro- and macro-level vectors need addressing. At the micro-level, the priority is working alongside Malaysian authorities to reinforce cognitive resilience. This means exchanging best practices on combatting media (il)literacy, social media addiction, and weak fact-checking habits. It also means jointly designing educational, awareness-raising, training, regulatory capacity-building projects as well as legislating social media access where appropriate. There is also the issue of the poor implementation of regulations governing information access, fact-checking, and expertise by government stakeholders. All of the above have become even more critical in an age of rampant generative AI usage. Such collaborative projects could be achieved in the short-term (1-2 year period) and would serve as the first step in addressing the aforementioned threats. Target groups, for instance, could range from assisting those most at risk of disinformation to promoting the above among high schoolers, educators, students, lecturers, civil servants and journalists.

In an age of democratic backsliding and the spread of populism globally, Germany and Europe need to promote the vitality of democracy among like-minded partners. Being democracies, Germany and Europe need to build a coalition of partners championing democracy internationally. Public events promoting democracy and its virtues must be jointly promoted with Malaysia, while securing Malaysia's support for the global advocacy of democracy must become a priority for Germany and Europe. The EU-Values Network conference on upholding democratic norms in turbulent times – as held at Binus University (Indonesia) in December 2025 – could help set the tone, even if such events would most likely need to be more sustained to ensure that its message is disseminated as far as possible. Again, this objective could be achieved within a relatively short turn-around period.

At the macro-level, there is much work to be done by Germany and European actors when it comes to soft power and public diplomacy. Although Chinese and Russian communication strategies need to be confronted and debunked accordingly, Germany and European partners need to play to their soft power strengths. But for this to take effect, three interrelated weaknesses need addressing:

- **Germany and Europe need to etch a distinctive place for themselves within Malaysia's geopolitical landscape as a credible hedging partner**: regularly caught in the US-China strategic rivalry headwinds, Malaysia needs alternative partners to offset the negative externalities often generated by these headwinds. Despite ambivalent public perceptions, Europe occupies only a "secondary position" in this geopolitical context far behind the two major powers as well as other hedging alternatives (Japan).
- There are different reasons for this ambivalence. It has been caused, in part, by the poorly managed and disjointed nature of European public diplomacy. By and large, Europe struggles to be heard as a stand-alone voice when it has too often relegated the uniqueness of its stance to a by-product of Western/American policy. Europe's place is thus synonymous with the West, which is now proving costly in light of the recklessness of US foreign policy under 'Trump 2.0.' Evidence shows the growing lack of appeal amongst Malaysians of different backgrounds for closer relations with the US. **Germany and Europe need to go above and beyond in disassociating themselves from the mantra of the West and rebuild this uniqueness in a way which will appeal to local audiences**.
- An additional means of boosting Germany and Europe's soft power in Malaysia is to **operate through the enhanced usage of Track II/III diplomacy**. Whether in the shape of getting influencers and/or locally-recognised experts to do its bidding towards select target audiences or by using technical assistance projects – a soft power play that has been proven empirically to work wonders for the EU's appeal in particular – to empower citizens of third countries to become spokespeople locally for the EU and the values for which it stands.
- Europe is often its own worst enemy when it comes to soft power projection and this explains why its public diplomacy does not reach its true potential in Malaysia – a flaw China and Russia have clearly sought to exploit. **A lot of the work needed to curate its global image starts at home**. Too much of the recent news about either Europe-Malaysia relations or of Europe in Malaysia tends to be negative (e.g. the palm oil dispute, political fracture and the rise of populism, treatment of migrants, etc.). **In the Malaysian context, not enough is done to highlight similarities or to put a positive spin on relations**. The new bilateral Free Trade Agreement should serve as an opportunity to showcase this convergence of interests. Highlighting the complexity of the European position on Palestine and European debates on this matter would go some way to improving its public diplomacy locally, at least in the short-term. European leaders and foreign ministers also need to apportion more time in visiting Malaysia, while reciprocating such invitations to local leaders.

A lack of endeavour on these micro and macro fronts will only facilitate the dissemination and impact of ideas as well as narratives that do not align with Germany and Europe's interests. With the geopolitical tides turning, it would be remiss of Germany and European actors not to seek to partner with Malaysia in working on the consolidation of the ties and values that bind them.

4. Bibliography

Ackerman, S., 2005, 'Falun Dafa and the New Age Movement in Malaysia: Signs of health, symbols of salvation', *Social Compass*, 52:4, 495-511.

Barton, B., 2026, 'The role of public diplomacy in EU-Asia relations', in Thomas Christiansen, Evi Fitriani, Emil Kirchner and Youngah Guakh (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of EU-Asia Relations*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan (forthcoming 2026).

Bernama, 2024, 'Malaysia, 12 other countries officially added as BRICS partner countries', https://bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2355720, accessed 6th April 2026.

Chin, J., 2022, 'Racism towards the Chinese minority in Malaysia: Political Islam and institutional barriers', *The Political Quarterly*, 93, 451-459.

Ibrahim, A., 2024, 'The 'western' influence on Malaysian politics'', *Free Malaysia Today*, https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2024/02/25/the-western-influence-on-malaysian-politics.

Kuek, S.K.K., Chan, W.S. & Wong, K.H., 2024, 'Diving into pro-Russia propaganda targeting Chinese audiences in Malaysia', *Sinopsis*, https://sinopsis.cz/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Diving_into_Propaganda.pdf.

Kuik, C.C., 2024, 'Explaining hedging: The case of Malaysian equidistance', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 46:1, 43-76.

Loh, B.Y.H. & Mustaffa, M., 2024, 'Social media discourse in Malaysia on the Russia-Ukraine conflict: Rationales for pro-Russia sentiments', *Fulcrum*, https://fulcrum.sg/social-media-discourse-in-malaysia-on-the-russia-ukraine-conflict-rationales-for-pro-russia-sentiments/.

Tseng, A.A., 2024, 'A reflective study on the intricate history of Chinese immigration in Peninsular Malaysia', *Asia and Pacific Migration Journal*, 33:3, 417-440.

UN, 2026, 'Support for lasting peace in Ukraine: Resolution adopted by the General Assembly', https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4103179#:~:text=Support%20for%20lasting%20peace%20in,Y%20CANADA, accessed 6th April 2026.

Wong, S.M., Lee, K.Y. & Chen, T-Y., 2024, 'Young and promising: New generation and the resilience of Taiwan-Malaysia relations', *International Journal of China Studies*, 15:2, 107-138.