



PERCEPTION ON GEOPOLITICS & REGIONAL ISSUES

Narrative Report
31 January 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines how Malaysians form geopolitical perceptions toward China and Russia by analysing how they engage with information and how this shapes their understanding of global developments, major powers, and governance. The study places particular emphasis on identifying the cognitive, experiential, and socio-demographic factors that structure these perceptions.

Using a mixed-methods approach combining a nationally representative CATI survey (**n=1,203**) and **12 expert interviews**, the analysis integrates descriptive findings with advanced structural modelling to explain not only what Malaysians think, but also how those views are formed. Importantly, the findings demonstrate that geopolitical perceptions are not shaped by exposure alone, but through a layered evaluative process involving trust, governance interpretation, bilateral relationship perception, and experiential engagement.

a) Highly Digitalised Information Environment

The findings show that Malaysians operate within a highly digitalised information ecosystem, where social media platforms serve as the primary gateway to both local and international news. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube are widely used, with many individuals spending several hours daily engaging with digital content. Exposure to information is therefore frequent, continuous, and distributed across multiple platforms.

However, high exposure does not necessarily translate into consistent awareness or understanding. While Malaysians demonstrate interest in global affairs, familiarity varies considerably depending on the visibility and prominence of specific issues. Highly publicised events such as the Israel–Palestine conflict receive widespread attention, while other strategically significant developments remain comparatively less understood. This suggests that while geopolitical narratives are reaching the Malaysian public, understanding remains broad and interpretive rather than institutionally detailed.

b) Recognition of Global Shifts but Limited Depth of Understanding

A key finding is that Malaysians broadly recognise the changing global order. Overall, 74% of respondents agree that the world is moving toward a more multipolar international system, indicating widespread awareness of shifts in global power distribution.

At the same time, this understanding remains largely conceptual. Awareness of specific geopolitical groupings such as BRICS remains relatively limited, with only 40% of respondents indicating knowledge of BRICS and only 3% reporting strong knowledge about the grouping.

Public responses also reflect a pragmatic and cautious orientation. While 66% agree that Malaysia should join BRICS, a larger majority (77%) believe such a move could create tensions with the United States. This suggests that Malaysians are broadly aware of global structural change, but their understanding remains general and selectively interpreted rather than deeply institutionalised.

c) Differentiated Perceptions of China and Russia

Public perceptions toward China and Russia are clearly differentiated and asymmetrical.

China is viewed more favourably overall, particularly in relation to economic cooperation, development, and bilateral relations with Malaysia. Approximately 75% of respondents express trust in China as an economic partner, while 76% believe Malaysia–China relations are moving in the right direction. In addition, 56% agree that Malaysia could emulate China’s development model for faster national progress. However, support for authoritarian governance itself remains comparatively lower, with only 40% agreeing that authoritarian systems can deliver better outcomes than democracy.

In contrast, perceptions of Russia are comparatively weaker and less differentiated. Trust in Russia as an economic partner stands at 55%, while only 53% view Malaysia–Russia relations positively. Overall, Russia-related perceptions appear more dependent on indirect narratives and media framing rather than direct relational engagement.

The findings further show that China and Russia occupy structurally different positions within Malaysian public perception. Exposure toward China is substantially higher, with 23% of respondents reporting having visited China and 37% reporting prior interaction with Chinese nationals, compared to only 2% and 7% respectively for Russia.

As a result, China is evaluated through a more relationally proximate and experience-sensitive framework, whereas perceptions of Russia remain comparatively distant, abstract, and media-driven.

d) Trust as the Central Driver of Geopolitical Perception

The analysis identifies a clear and structured cognitive model underlying how Malaysians form geopolitical perceptions.

Across both country contexts, trust emerges as the strongest and most consistent driver shaping bilateral relationship perception. In the Russia model, trust strongly predicts bilateral relationship perception ($\beta = 0.680$, $p < .001$), while the effect is even stronger in the China model ($\beta = 0.862$, $p < .001$).

Rather than evaluating countries primarily through ideological or governance-based considerations, Malaysians appear to interpret international relationships through a trust-based lens particularly in relation to economic cooperation, strategic partnership, and practical engagement.

The findings further demonstrate that geopolitical perceptions are formed through a structured sequential evaluation process. Authoritarian predisposition first shapes trust and governance evaluations before influencing bilateral relationship perception and eventually overall country evaluation.

Importantly, the direct effect of authoritarian predisposition on overall country evaluation remains weak and statistically non-significant in both models (Russia: $\beta = 0.067$, ns; China: $\beta = 0.057$, ns). This confirms that geopolitical perceptions are cognitively layered, relationally mediated, and structurally organised rather than immediate or purely ideological.

e) Relational and Experience-Based Evaluation

Geopolitical perceptions are strongly shaped by how Malaysians view Malaysia's relationship with other countries. These relational perceptions act as the key link between intermediate judgments and overall evaluations.

Importantly, the role of personal exposure introduces a critical distinction. While Malaysians are generally exposed to global information, only exposure that is socially or economically embedded affects how perceptions are formed.

Perceptions of Russia tend to be stable and abstract, reflecting limited exposure and reliance on indirect information.

Perceptions of China are more flexible and differentiated, shaped by higher levels of interaction, familiarity, and presence in daily life.

This shows that proximity rather than exposure alone is what drives variation in perception.

f) Selective Trust and Uneven Resilience

Malaysians rely primarily on domestic media sources when forming opinions about international developments, with 74% expressing trust toward Malaysian mainstream media compared to lower trust toward Chinese (27%) and Russian government media (20%). At the same time, 55% believe Western media unfairly demonises China and Russia, reflecting selective scepticism toward external geopolitical narratives.

The findings also show moderate levels of media resilience. Around 53% verify information before sharing, while 75% compare multiple sources before believing international news. Structurally, foreign information influence does not significantly predict media resilience (Russia: $\beta = -0.020$, ns; China: $\beta = 0.038$, ns), although media resilience demonstrates a weak but significant relationship with authoritarian predisposition (Russia: $\beta = 0.094$, $p < .05$; China: $\beta = 0.084$, $p < .05$).

g) Strong Support for Democracy with Performance Concerns

The findings show that Malaysians continue to express strong normative support for democracy, with 80% agreeing that democracy is suitable for Malaysia and 85% agreeing that democracy remains the best form of government despite its shortcomings. However,

satisfaction with democratic performance is comparatively lower, with only 48% satisfied with how democracy currently functions in practice.

At the same time, the findings from RQ3 indicate that democratic support coexists alongside pragmatic governance considerations. While most respondents continue to support democratic governance, a notable proportion also express openness toward strong leadership, stability, and performance-oriented governance particularly when linked to economic development and effective administration.

This pattern is especially visible in perceptions toward China. Respondents with stronger authoritarian-oriented attitudes tend to express higher trust toward China and more favourable views of China's governance and development model. In contrast, perceptions toward Russia are comparatively less structured and less strongly associated with governance orientation.

Overall, the findings suggest that Malaysians do not necessarily evaluate foreign countries through rigid democratic-versus-authoritarian categories. Instead, evaluations are shaped more pragmatically through perceptions of governance effectiveness, economic performance, stability, and Malaysia's bilateral relationship with these countries.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The way Malaysians access and engage with information has changed significantly in recent years. Individuals are exposed to a wide range of local and international content throughout the day, often through algorithm-driven platforms rather than traditional media channels. This shift has increased the volume and diversity of information available.

In this context, understanding how Malaysians engage with information is increasingly important, especially in relation to global developments and geopolitical narratives. Exposure to international issues is no longer limited to formal news coverage, but is shaped by what appears in everyday digital feeds. As a result, awareness of global events can vary depending on how frequently issues are surfaced, how they are framed, and how individuals interpret them within their own social and informational environments.

At the same time, the global system is undergoing visible changes, with increasing attention on the shift from a unipolar to a more multipolar world. While these developments are widely discussed, it is important to understand how they are perceived by the public particularly their level of awareness, depth of understanding, and interpretation of key geopolitical dynamics. Public perceptions are not only shaped by exposure, but also by personal experience, media framing, and broader national context.

In particular, perceptions of major powers such as China and Russia provide a useful lens through which to examine how Malaysians interpret global developments. These perceptions are likely to vary depending on the extent of economic, social, and relational engagement

with each country. Understanding these differences is critical in assessing how geopolitical narratives are received, filtered, and translated into public opinion.

Importantly, this study goes beyond describing patterns of perception to examine the underlying mechanisms through which these perceptions are formed. Rather than assuming that exposure directly shapes attitudes, the study adopts a structured analytical approach to identify the roles of trust, governance evaluations, ideological predispositions, and relational factors in shaping how Malaysians evaluate foreign countries. This allows for a more systematic understanding of how information is processed and translated into judgment.

Overall, this study situates Malaysian public opinion within a high-exposure, digitally mediated information environment, while recognising that perception formation is not driven by exposure alone. Instead, it reflects a structured and context-dependent process shaped by multiple interacting factors, including trust, relational proximity, and individual interpretation. By combining descriptive findings with advanced analytical approaches, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how Malaysians make sense of an increasingly complex global landscape.

1.1 Objective of Study

This study is designed to move beyond descriptive assessment and provide a structured understanding of how geopolitical perceptions are formed among Malaysians. Specifically, the study aims to:

- **To examine how Malaysians access and engage with information** within a highly digital and social media-driven environment, particularly in relation to global issues and narratives.
- **To assess Malaysians' awareness and interpretation of global developments**, including their understanding of shifts in the international system and key geopolitical dynamics.
- **To analyse public perceptions of China and Russia across multiple dimensions**, including economic, governance, and geopolitical considerations.
- **To identify and test the key drivers of geopolitical perception**, with a focus on the roles of trust, governance evaluations, ideological predisposition, and bilateral relationship perceptions.
- **To examine the role of personal exposure and experience in shaping perception formation**, particularly in differentiating between abstract (symbolic) and experience-based (relational) evaluations.
- **To segment the Malaysian public into distinct geopolitical perception profiles** and analyse the factors associated with different orientations.
- **To observe public attitudes toward democracy and governance in Malaysia**, including levels of support, satisfaction, and openness to alternative governance approaches.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The contemporary geopolitical environment is increasingly shaped by global power competition, digital communication technologies, fragmented information ecosystems, and shifting public perceptions toward major powers. In recent years, growing discussions surrounding the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the relative decline of Western dominance have intensified debates regarding the transition from a unipolar to a more multipolar international system (Acharya, 2017; Zakaria, 2008).

At the same time, geopolitical influence is no longer exercised solely through military strength or formal diplomacy. Increasingly, states compete through narratives, economic integration, digital media ecosystems, and public perception management (Castells, 2009; Nye, 2004). As social media platforms become deeply embedded within everyday life, citizens are continuously exposed to geopolitical developments through online platforms, algorithm-driven feeds, short-form content, and networked information environments.

Within this context, understanding how ordinary citizens form geopolitical perceptions has become increasingly important. Public evaluations toward countries such as China and Russia are no longer shaped purely through ideological orientation or foreign policy knowledge alone. Instead, perceptions are increasingly influenced by trust, relational familiarity, media exposure, interpersonal interaction, economic engagement, and digital information processing.

This literature review examines the major theoretical and empirical scholarship relevant to the study of Malaysian perceptions toward China, Russia, democracy, and the changing global order. The review focuses on seven major themes:

- Global geopolitical transition and multipolarity
- Trust and relational evaluation in geopolitical perception
- Media ecosystems and digital information exposure
- Media resilience and information processing
- Democracy, governance orientation, and political pragmatism
- Southeast Asian strategic pragmatism and relational engagement
- Malaysian digital information ecosystems and media behaviour

The review concludes by identifying the key research gaps addressed by the present study.

2.2 Global Geopolitical Transition and the Rise of Multipolarity

One of the defining features of contemporary international relations is the growing perception that the global system is transitioning from a unipolar order dominated by the United States toward a more multipolar international structure involving multiple centres of influence (Acharya, 2017).

Following the end of the Cold War, the United States emerged as the dominant global superpower, shaping much of the international political, economic, and security order (Ikenberry, 2011). However, the rapid rise of China, the strategic resurgence of Russia, and the growing influence of non-Western powers have increasingly challenged the concentration of global power within Western-led institutions and governance systems.

Acharya (2017) argues that the international system is increasingly characterised by a “multiplex world order,” where multiple actors simultaneously shape global politics, economics, and strategic influence. Similarly, Zakaria (2008) describes this transition as “the rise of the rest,” where emerging powers increasingly challenge Western dominance across global governance and economic systems.

China’s rise has been central to this transformation. Through trade expansion, technological development, infrastructure investment, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has expanded both its economic and strategic influence across Asia and beyond (Rolland, 2017; Shambaugh, 2013). Russia, meanwhile, has increasingly positioned itself as a strategic challenger to Western influence through military assertiveness, energy diplomacy, and geopolitical narrative projection (Pomerantsev, 2014).

Importantly, scholars increasingly argue that perceptions of global power transition are not shaped solely through objective geopolitical developments, but also through media narratives, political discourse, and public interpretation (Entman, 2008). In highly digitalised societies, geopolitical competition increasingly unfolds within public information environments where citizens continuously encounter competing narratives surrounding major powers, democracy, international conflict, and global governance.

2.3 Trust and Relational Evaluation in Geopolitical Perception

Existing studies suggest that trust plays a central role in shaping international perception and foreign policy attitudes. Public evaluations toward foreign countries are often formed not only through ideological orientation or political values, but also through perceptions of reliability, cooperation, predictability, and mutual benefit (Brewer et al., 2004).

Within international relations literature, trust is increasingly understood as a relational mechanism that reduces uncertainty and facilitates cooperation between states and societies (Rathbun, 2012). Countries perceived as economically beneficial, strategically reliable, or politically stable are more likely to generate favourable public evaluations.

Importantly, trust-based evaluations are often pragmatic rather than ideological. Citizens may express favourable perceptions toward countries that provide economic opportunity, investment, trade, or perceived stability even when they do not fully endorse those countries’ political systems or governance models.

This distinction is particularly relevant in understanding perceptions toward China and Russia within Southeast Asia. Existing studies suggest that China’s extensive economic integration

and sustained engagement within the region have contributed to stronger familiarity, strategic trust, and relational embeddedness compared to more distant powers (Lee, 2018).

At the same time, trust formation may also be shaped by interpersonal familiarity and lived interaction. Countries that are more visible within everyday social and economic environments may generate more coherent and differentiated perception structures compared to countries encountered primarily through mediated geopolitical narratives.

Johnston (2013) similarly argues that perceptions toward China increasingly emerge through direct economic and social interaction rather than purely ideological framing. This suggests that geopolitical evaluations may depend not only on informational exposure, but also on relational proximity, familiarity, and experiential engagement.

This relational understanding of trust is particularly important for the present study, where trust emerges as the strongest explanatory factor shaping bilateral relationship perceptions toward both China and Russia.

2.4 Media Ecosystems and Digital Information Exposure

The expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed how citizens encounter political and geopolitical information. Social media platforms increasingly function as primary gateways through which individuals consume news, engage with narratives, and interpret international developments (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

Castells (2009) argues that communication power increasingly operates through decentralised digital networks where information flows are rapid, fragmented, and algorithmically mediated. Within such environments, exposure to international affairs is shaped not only by traditional media institutions, but also by online engagement patterns, platform algorithms, social networks, and digital communities.

Studies consistently show that platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp now play central roles in shaping political awareness and information exposure, particularly among younger populations (Howard, 2020). However, these same platforms also contribute to fragmented information ecosystems characterised by competing narratives, selective exposure, emotional amplification, and misinformation circulation.

Importantly, exposure to information does not necessarily imply passive acceptance. Guess et al. (2020) demonstrate that individuals selectively engage with information based on prior beliefs, trust networks, and identity orientation. Similarly, Chadwick (2017) argues that contemporary information environments operate as “hybrid media systems,” where individuals continuously negotiate information across traditional media, online commentary, peer networks, and institutional sources.

This suggests that geopolitical narratives are not simply transmitted directly from states to audiences. Instead, they are selectively interpreted, compared, contextualised, and negotiated within broader social and informational environments.

2.5 Media Resilience and Information Processing

The rapid expansion of digital information ecosystems has intensified concerns surrounding misinformation, propaganda, and information manipulation. Scholars increasingly emphasise the importance of media resilience and verification behaviour in understanding how individuals navigate contemporary information environments (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) define information disorder as the circulation of false, misleading, manipulated, or decontextualised information across digital systems. However, they also argue that exposure alone is insufficient to determine belief acceptance. Instead, individuals' interpretive frameworks, cognitive resilience, and verification behaviour mediate informational influence.

Research on media literacy similarly suggests that individuals increasingly engage in selective verification practices when navigating digital information environments (Vraga & Tully, 2021). Verification behaviour may include comparing multiple sources, consulting trusted news organisations, relying on interpersonal networks, or cross-checking information through online searches.

Importantly, several scholars challenge the assumption that greater informational exposure automatically produces stronger influence or ideological alignment. Bradshaw and Howard (2019) argue that informational influence depends not only on visibility, but also on emotional resonance, relational trust, social reinforcement, and contextual relevance.

This distinction is particularly important in understanding geopolitical perception formation. Exposure to geopolitical narratives may increase familiarity with global developments, but influence becomes more meaningful when reinforced through relational proximity, economic engagement, interpersonal interaction, and lived experience.

The present study builds upon this distinction by arguing that exposure alone is insufficient to fully explain geopolitical perception formation. Instead, geopolitical evaluations appear to emerge through broader processes involving trust, relational familiarity, contextual interpretation, and experiential embedding.

2.6 Democracy, Governance Orientation, and Political Pragmatism

Existing scholarship suggests that democratic support and openness toward strong leadership are not always mutually exclusive. In many societies, citizens may simultaneously support democratic principles while also expressing openness toward stability-oriented governance, decisive leadership, or performance-based legitimacy under certain conditions (Chu et al., 2008).

Inglehart and Norris (2016) argue that political attitudes increasingly reflect tensions between liberal democratic ideals and demands for social order, security, and strong leadership. Similarly, Shin (2015) notes that within many Asian political contexts, governance

performance and economic delivery frequently coexist alongside democratic aspiration within public opinion structures.

Together, these studies suggest the presence of a more pragmatic mode of political evaluation, where governance systems are often assessed less through rigid ideological categories and more through perceived effectiveness, economic performance, and state capability. Nathan (2003), for example, highlights how governance performance and institutional adaptability contribute to the resilience and legitimacy of authoritarian systems.

Within geopolitical perception studies, this suggests that favourable evaluations toward countries such as China or Russia do not necessarily imply direct endorsement of authoritarian governance itself. Instead, positive perceptions may reflect broader admiration for economic development, governance efficiency, strategic capability, or perceived state effectiveness.

This distinction is particularly relevant within Southeast Asia, where states frequently prioritise strategic pragmatism, economic engagement, and policy flexibility over rigid ideological alignment (Acharya, 2017).

2.7 Southeast Asian Strategic Pragmatism and Relational Engagement

Several Southeast Asian states have historically adopted pragmatic and flexible approaches toward major power competition. Rather than aligning rigidly with any single geopolitical bloc, many ASEAN countries pursue hedging strategies aimed at preserving strategic autonomy while maintaining diversified partnerships (Kuik, 2008).

Malaysia's foreign policy orientation has long reflected this pragmatic hedging approach. Kuik (2008) argues that Malaysia simultaneously engages major powers economically and strategically while avoiding direct alignment with any single power. This allows Malaysia to maintain economic cooperation with China while preserving broader strategic flexibility and diversified international relationships.

This pragmatic orientation is also shaped by economic interdependence. China's growing role as a major trading partner, investor, and manufacturing hub has increased its economic and social visibility within Malaysia and Southeast Asia more broadly (Lee, 2018). Such proximity contributes to greater familiarity, sustained exposure, and everyday interaction, which may subsequently shape public perception.

In contrast, countries with lower levels of direct engagement may be evaluated more abstractly through mediated geopolitical narratives rather than through lived experience or sustained relational interaction.

2.8 Research Gaps

Despite growing scholarship on geopolitics, media ecosystems, and democratic attitudes, several important gaps remain.

First, much of the existing literature examines geopolitical perception descriptively rather than structurally. Limited studies attempt to explain how geopolitical perceptions are cognitively formed and interconnected through trust, governance evaluation, bilateral relationship perception, democratic orientation, exposure, and relational experience simultaneously.

Second, studies frequently examine democracy, media exposure, geopolitical perception, and information resilience separately rather than integrating them within a broader evaluative framework.

This study attempt to addresses these gaps by integrating descriptive public opinion analysis with structural modelling to explain how Malaysians form geopolitical perceptions within an increasingly complex and digitally mediated information environment.

Importantly, the study introduces relational embedding as a key explanatory mechanism, arguing that geopolitical influence becomes more meaningful when reinforced through economic integration, interpersonal interaction, social familiarity, and relational proximity rather than informational exposure alone.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design that integrates a nationally representative quantitative survey with qualitative expert interviews. This approach allows for the systematic measurement of public exposure, beliefs, and attitudes while contextualising these patterns within broader expert evaluations of Malaysia's information environment.

3.1 Quantitative Component: National CATI Survey

The quantitative component is based on a Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) survey conducted among Malaysian adults.

In total, 1,203 respondents were interviewed via telephone. The sample was selected using **random stratified sampling**, with stratification applied by state, ethnicity, age, and gender. This design ensured the proportional representation of key population subgroups and reduced sampling bias across major demographic dimensions.

Within each stratum, respondents were randomly selected from the available sampling frames. Interviews were conducted in the appropriate languages to ensure respondent comprehension and inclusivity.

To further correct for any residual imbalances arising from differential response rates, the survey data were weighted by state, ethnicity, age, and gender. All results presented in this report are based on weighted data, unless otherwise indicated.

The survey instrument covered the following themes:

- Internet and media consumption trends
- Awareness and perception towards world countries
- Perception towards Russia and China
- Perception towards democratic values
- Narrative of authoritarian state
- Information operation in Malaysia
- Perception on foreign relations
- Regional issues and geopolitics

The CATI methodology was selected to ensure broad national coverage.

3.2 Qualitative Component: Expert Interviews

In parallel, the study conducted **12 semi-structured expert interviews** with individuals possessing relevant expertise in media, information integrity, geopolitics, democracy and foreign policy.

These interviews provided contextual depth to the survey findings, offering insights into the following:

- Overview on geopolitics and foreign relations
- View on security and defence
- View on economy and trade
- Information operation in Malaysia
- View on democratic vs authoritarian narratives

Qualitative findings were used to contextualise and interpret the survey results.

4.0 NARRATIVE FINDINGS

4.1 Finding 1 : Information Environment and Exposure to Global Narratives

In Malaysia, the rapid expansion of digital media has transformed the way news and political information are consumed. Social media platforms, in particular, have become a central gateway through which many individuals encounter both local and international developments. As a result, exposure to global issues increasingly occurs through algorithm-driven feeds and short-form digital content rather than through traditional news sources.

This survey indicates that Malaysians demonstrate a notable level of interest in international affairs. However, this interest does not necessarily translate into consistent awareness across all issues. Familiarity with international developments varies considerably.

Understanding these dynamics is important in assessing how Malaysians engage with geopolitical developments involving major powers. While some events receive widespread public attention, others remain less visible despite their strategic importance. The expert

interviews suggest that this information environment is increasingly shaped by social media and less by printed media,

A Senior Academician mentioned,

“The way society accesses information has fundamentally changed. The method of access has changed. I do not have the exact percentages, but the majority of people now receive information through social media. We are dealing with a generation that has no connection at all to print media. They have no memory of it, no emotional attachment, and no habit of engaging with it. If you place a printed newspaper somewhere, it will not be touched for days by this generation.”

To further analyse this section, the following items were selected (See Appendix 1).

4.1.1 Role of Platforms and Media Infrastructure

A central feature of the information landscape is the dominant role of social media as a channel for news consumption. For local news, on average, 48% of respondents identified social media as their main source, compared to 25% for television and 8% for printed newspapers or magazines. On the other hand, nearly half of respondents (46%) reported that social media platforms constitute their primary source of international news. Among respondents who reported exposure, Facebook (46%) and TikTok (36%) were the most frequently cited platforms. The second and third source of international news mentioned were television (26%) and news websites or online forums (11%).

From the interview conducted, an expert also highlighted,

“I do think that at this point in time, social media and also digital platforms are much more prominent than traditional media in getting all these kinds of information. But if you talk about Gen Z, the younger generation, I will think that perhaps TikTok, YouTube, you know, that’s where they are getting all this information, and even from Twitter or X, right? So, I think for different groups of respondents, they will have different platforms for getting all these kinds of information.”

Another senior diplomat mentioned

“TikTok is the actual content where you actually can see and listen and interact. See and listen is TikTok. So, TikTok is actually number one. Facebook is also very important. Facebook is the static, what do you call, transfer of information.”

Alongside this exposure to international news, Malaysians also demonstrate a notable level of interest in global affairs. Approximately 65% of respondents reported that they are interested in following news related to global affairs. This interest is particularly pronounced among respondents with higher levels of education and household income.

The expert interviews further suggest that geopolitical exposure within Malaysia is closely tied to economic interdependence and geoeconomic realities, where international developments are often interpreted through their implications for trade, economic stability, and regional strategic competition.

A Senior Diplomat mentioned,

“Geopolitics in the Malaysian sense, as I understand it, is basically geoeconomic.”

4.1.2 Awareness on Global Development

The survey also assessed respondents’ awareness of several ongoing international developments to understand how closely Malaysians follow global events.

Among the issues tested, the Israel–Palestine conflict recorded the highest level of awareness, with 49% of respondents indicating familiarity with developments surrounding the conflict.

“Palestine is no longer just a Muslim–Jewish issue; it is a humanitarian issue. Support for Palestine will grow, and pressure to resolve it will increase.” –a Senior Media Practitioner

Other international issues received substantially lower levels of public attention. Awareness of the Thailand–Cambodia conflict stood at 24%, while 22% reported awareness of developments related to the Russia–Ukraine war.

Awareness of broader geopolitical competition appears comparatively lower. Only 19% of respondents reported awareness of US–China trade competition, while 17% were aware of recent Gen Z protests in Indonesia and 17% of the Sudan civil conflict. Developments surrounding the United States recorded the lowest level of awareness among the issues tested, with 14% of respondents indicating familiarity with those developments.

Demographic patterns suggest that awareness tends to be higher among younger respondents and individuals with higher household income levels, who generally report greater engagement with global developments. For example, awareness of the Israel–Palestine conflict reaches 68% among respondents aged 18–30.

In the case of Russia-related developments, awareness of the MH17 tragedy remains relatively high. Overall, 79% of respondents reported being aware of the incident. The high level of awareness likely reflects the tragedy’s direct connection to Malaysia and its extensive coverage in domestic media.

However, interpretations of responsibility for the event remain divided. Among respondents who were aware of the MH17 tragedy, 43% believed Russia was responsible, while 36% believed Russia was not responsible, with the remaining 20% respondents indicating uncertainty.

In contrast, awareness of developments related to China appears comparatively lower. When asked about events and developments occurring in the South China Sea, only 40% of respondents reported awareness.

Among respondents who were aware of developments in the South China Sea, 55% identified China as the key perpetrator of tensions in the region, while 21% attributed responsibility to the United States, and smaller proportions cited other actors or expressed uncertainty.

The expert interviews indicate that developments in the South China Sea are interpreted not only as territorial disputes, but also as part of broader strategic competition involving major powers and regional stability concerns.

A seasoned academician mentioned,

“What we are more concerned about is the involvement of extra regional powers like the United States in that dispute. We are concerned that any miscalculation or any misstep would lead to a conflict in the South China Sea.”

Another senior diplomat mentioned,

“The South China Sea issue is important because China is our main economic partner. We cannot offend our main economic partner, but at the same time, we also have security concerns there.”

4.2 Finding 2: How do Malaysians understand the changing global system?

In recent years, the global system has been undergoing visible changes, with increasing discussion around the shift from a single dominant power to a more distributed structure involving multiple major countries. These developments are frequently covered in the media and are increasingly part of everyday information exposure, particularly through digital platforms. As a result, Malaysians are not only exposed to global narratives but are also forming their own views about how the international system is evolving.

In this context, it is important to understand how Malaysians interpret these changes. This includes their awareness of broader shifts in global power, as well as their understanding of specific groupings and developments that are often associated with these changes. At the same time, public perceptions are not limited to global trends alone, but also extend to how these developments may affect Malaysia’s position, interests, and relationships with other countries.

The expert interviews similarly suggest that Malaysia increasingly views the international system as becoming more fragmented, uncertain, and shaped by competition between multiple major powers. Several experts described the current global environment as increasingly unstable compared to previous decades.

This section therefore examines how Malaysians make sense of the changing global system. It looks at their level of awareness, their interpretation of key geopolitical developments, and their views on how Malaysia should navigate an increasingly complex international environment. The following items were used to understand this section (**see Appendix 2**).

4.2.1 Broad Acceptance of a Multipolar Global System

When asked whether the global system is moving towards a multipolar structure where power is distributed among several major countries rather than dominated by a single superpower, a clear majority of respondents express agreement. Overall, 74% agree indicating that the idea of a shifting global balance of power is widely recognised among Malaysians.

This perception is relatively consistent across demographic groups. Agreement is particularly high among Chinese respondents (90% agree), followed by Indian (71%) and Malay respondents (69%). Across age groups, agreement remains strong, peaking among those aged 31–40 (81%) and remaining above two-thirds across all cohorts.

The expert interviews strongly reinforce this perception of a changing international system. Several experts highlighted that smaller countries such as Malaysia are increasingly operating within a more competitive and uncertain geopolitical environment.

During the interview with a geopolitical expert, the expert highlighted

“Malaysia is deeply embedded in global supply chains that are centred around both the United States and China... Malaysia’s geopolitical concern is not only about territorial disputes in the South China Sea, but also about managing economic dependence and supply chain linkages between these major powers without being forced to choose sides.”

Similarly, an academician also noted,

“I would say that at this point in time, our major geopolitical concern would be the intensifying US-China competition.”

4.2.2 Limited Awareness of BRICS

Despite this broad recognition of the multipolar system, awareness of specific geopolitical groupings such as BRICS remains more limited. Overall, only 40% of respondents reported knowledge about BRICS with about only 3% exhibiting strong knowledge about BRICS, while a majority (58%) indicate that they have little or no knowledge of the grouping. This highlights a clear gap between general awareness of global shifts and understanding of the institutional structures shaping them.

Differences in awareness are observed across demographic groups. Knowledge of BRICS is relatively higher among Chinese respondents (45%) compared to Malay (41%) and Indian respondents (27%). Awareness is also higher among male respondents (54%) compared to female respondents (26%), pointing to a significant gender gap.

The expert interviews suggest that while Malaysians may broadly recognise geopolitical changes, public understanding is often shaped more by practical economic implications rather than institutional geopolitical frameworks themselves.

A senior diplomat mentioned,

“Geopolitics in the Malaysian sense, as I understand it, is basically geoeconomic.”

4.2.3 Cautious Openness Towards BRICS and Its Implications

Among those who are aware of BRICS, perceptions of the grouping are generally moderate. A majority view Russia's role within BRICS positively, with 63% expressing a positive view. When considering Malaysia's potential engagement with BRICS, respondents express a degree of openness. Around 66% agree that Malaysia should join BRICS, while 18% disagree suggesting receptiveness towards diversifying international partnerships. However, this openness is tempered by concerns about geopolitical consequences. A large majority (77%) believe that Malaysia joining BRICS would likely create tensions with the United States.

At the same time, views on whether joining BRICS would affect Malaysia's neutrality are more divided. Around 50% expressed concerns that neutrality would be affected.

The expert interviews strongly reflect this balancing mentality. Across the interviews, experts consistently emphasised that Malaysia seeks to maintain strategic flexibility and avoid rigid alignment with major powers.

An senior academician interviewed mentioned,

“active neutrality... we are pragmatic, we are non-aligned and we anchored in ASEAN centrality.”

Another academician also mentioned,

“We don't want to choose sides. We have always survived without making choices.”

These findings suggest that while Malaysians appear receptive towards greater engagement with emerging geopolitical groupings such as BRICS, this openness remains cautious and pragmatic. Support for diversification does not necessarily imply a desire for rigid geopolitical alignment, but rather reflects broader efforts to maintain strategic flexibility, economic engagement, and balanced relations within an increasingly multipolar international environment.

4.3 Finding 3 : Public responses to narratives about China and Russia

4.3.1 Descriptive Narrative Landscape: Baseline Perception and Information Context

At the descriptive level, public perceptions toward China and Russia are differentiated across governance, economic, geopolitical, and media dimensions, with a consistently more favourable orientation toward China. This pattern reflects not only evaluative preferences but also differences in exposure, familiarity, and information sources that shape how respondents engage with international narratives. For this section, the following items were used to study the baseline findings (see Appendix 3).

The expert interviews similarly suggest that China occupies a far more visible and strategically embedded position within Malaysia's economic and geopolitical environment compared to

Russia. Across the interviews, experts repeatedly described China as deeply integrated into Malaysia's trade, economic development, and regional strategic considerations, whereas Russia was generally viewed as more distant and less directly connected to Malaysia's everyday realities.

As a senior academician mentioned,

“China is our biggest trading partner, and on China, Malaysia is their biggest trading partner within ASEAN.”

Similarly, a senior diplomat also said,

“China is a production house. Malaysia can only survive by fitting into the ecosystem — semiconductors, SMEs, components.”

These observations closely support the broader descriptive pattern where China appears significantly more socially, economically, and experientially embedded within respondents' environments compared to Russia.

4.3.1.1 Relative Favourability and Exposure Context

China is generally viewed more positively than Russia, particularly in relation to economic cooperation and bilateral relations with Malaysia. This aligns with the broader contextual pattern of higher exposure and familiarity with China, where respondents report substantially greater engagement through travel, family connections, and interpersonal interactions. For instance, 23% of respondents have visited China compared to only 2% for Russia, while 37% report interactions with Chinese nationals versus 7% with Russians. Exposure is especially pronounced among Chinese respondents, with 61% having visited China and 66% reporting prior interactions. This asymmetry in exposure provides an important baseline context: China is more socially and experientially embedded in respondents' environments, whereas Russia remains relatively distant.

The expert interviews strongly reinforce this contrast in relational proximity. China was repeatedly discussed in practical and everyday economic terms, while Russia appeared comparatively less embedded within Malaysia's economic and social environment.

A media practitioner mentioned,

“Malaysia is therefore deeply embedded in global supply chains that are centred around both the United States and China...”

Another senior academician also noted,

“Russia, after Vladivostok, they are not present here. They have no soft power projection in Asia. Nothing.”

These findings suggest that perceptions toward China are shaped within a context of greater familiarity, interaction, and practical engagement, whereas perceptions toward Russia are formed within a comparatively more distant informational environment.

4.3.1.2 Governance Narratives: Limited but Differentiated Openness

Public responses to governance narratives show moderate but differentiated openness. When asked whether China should serve as a governance model, 45% of respondents agree while 50% disagree. In contrast, agreement with Russia as a governance alternative stands lower at 31%. Agreement with China is higher among Chinese respondents (59%), while agreement with Russia is relatively higher among Bumiputera Muslims (42%).

The expert interviews suggest that public openness toward mainly to China is often shaped more by perceptions of economic performance, and strategic pragmatism.

As a senior diplomat mentioned,

“National interest is based on outcome... even though we become unpopular with some countries, if the outcome benefits us, then that’s our national interest.”

Similarly, an international relation expert mentioned,

“We want cooperation. We believe cooperation will produce the best result.”

These perspectives suggest that favourable perceptions toward major power like China and to some extent Russia do not necessarily reflect wholesale endorsement of authoritarian governance, but may instead reflect more pragmatic evaluations linked to development, stability, and economic outcomes.

4.3.1.3 Economic Narratives: Stronger Confidence in China

Economic perceptions show a clearer and more consistent pattern. A majority of respondents (75%) express trust in China as an economic partner, compared with 55% for Russia. Trust in China is particularly high among Chinese respondents (92%), while lower among Malays (65%). For Russia, trust is more moderate, with the highest levels observed among Bumiputera Muslims (60%).

However, this economic confidence does not fully extend to governance endorsement. While 75% trust China economically, only 40% agree that authoritarian governance delivers better outcomes than democracy. At the same time, 56% agree that Malaysia could follow China’s development model for faster progress, compared with 36% who disagree.

The expert interviews strongly support this perception of China as an economically important and strategically significant partner. Across the interviews, experts consistently framed China primarily through economic interdependence, trade, and development cooperation.

An academician mentioned,

“With China, we have a very strong relationship in terms of technology, trade, etc.”

Similarly, another expert mentioned,

“Because China is the main economic partner. We cannot offend our main economic partner.”

These findings suggest that positive perceptions toward China are strongly linked to economic considerations and perceptions of practical benefit rather than purely ideological alignment.

4.3.1.4 Bilateral and Governance Perceptions: More Positive Orientation Toward China

Geopolitical indicators reinforce this pattern of relative favourability. Trust in China as a security and defence partner stands at 54%, compared with 47% for Russia. Similarly, perceptions of bilateral relations are more positive for China, with 76% indicating that Malaysia–China relations are moving in the right direction, compared with 53% for Malaysia–Russia relations.

On more sensitive issues, such as treatment of Muslim minorities, public views remain mixed. For China, 42% disagree that its government is tolerant toward Uyghur Muslims. For Russia, 31% disagree regarding its treatment of Muslim minorities in Chechnya.

The expert interviews suggest though Malaysians are aware about the issues related to Muslim minority in Uyghur and Chechnya, their attention to these issues are not as great as given to the issue related to Palestine. For instance, a senior diplomat mentioned,

“there are some negative narratives here that China is not treating its ethnic minorities well, especially in the case of Xinjiang.”

Another senior media practitioner also noted,

“Malaysians don't see human rights abuse in Uyghur, Xinjiang area as equally important as Palestinian issue, or any other part of history.”

The expert interviews also suggest that Malaysia's geopolitical orientation toward China is shaped less by rigid ideological alignment and more by strategic balancing and pragmatic engagement.

As one of the experts interviewed mentioned,

“Foreign policy is not based on emotions. It is based on interests.”

Another expert mentioned,

“I don't know if we have a growing trade volume with Russia. I really don't. So, I can't figure that out. So, maybe I won't comment so much on Russia, but on China, China is one of our biggest trading partner. Well, China is everyone's biggest trading partner, but China is also one of the biggest sources of foreign direct investment.”

Another academician mentioned,

“I would say that our expanding trade with China does shape economic interdependence rather than dependence, meaning that we are depending on one another rather than Malaysia depending solely on China. So, I would highlight that it has created this significant economic interdependence. So, China's role is prominent because of trade.”

These perspectives help explain why respondents may simultaneously express positive bilateral perceptions while remaining cautious on more sensitive political and human rights-related issues.

4.3.1.5 Media Credibility: Domestic Anchoring of Information

The information environment reveals a pattern of **domestic anchoring in opinion formation**. Trust in official state media from both countries is low, with only 20% trusting Russian government media and 27% trusting Chinese government media, while 53% and 50% respectively express distrust.

In contrast, domestic sources are significantly more trusted:

- 74% trust Malaysian mainstream media

At the same time, 55% of respondents agree that Western media unfairly demonizes China and Russia, indicating a degree of scepticism toward external narratives.

This suggests the possibility that Malaysians primarily interpret international developments through locally trusted information channels, rather than relying on foreign state media or fully accepting Western narratives.

The expert interviews similarly suggest that Malaysians increasingly navigate a complex information environment characterised by competing geopolitical narratives and selective interpretation of international developments.

4.3.1.6 Narratives on the Russia–Ukraine War

Awareness of the Russia–Ukraine war among Malaysians were recorded below one third (22%) moderate. When asked who is more responsible for the war in Ukraine, only 18.1% identified Russia as primarily responsible. A larger share, 29.7%, attributed responsibility to the United States, while 9.9% cited NATO, 14.4% cited Ukraine, and 27.9% were unsure or did not respond.

The demographic pattern is also important. Attribution of responsibility to the United States is particularly high among Malay (31.0%) and Muslim Bumiputera (41.7%) respondents, youths aged 18-30 (44%) and degree level education and above (49%) compared to other ethnic groups.

The findings point to a broader scepticism toward Western geopolitical framing, where parts of the Malaysian public interpret the war through a wider lens of Western power.

This finding is especially relevant to understand that the Russia–Ukraine war is not necessarily understood in Malaysia through the same moral and geopolitical framing that dominates European discourse. Instead, Malaysian respondents appear to encounter and sometimes accept alternative explanations that place greater responsibility on the United States or Western actors

4.3.2 Analytical Insight: Drivers of Geopolitical Perception of Russia and China

The findings from this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how Malaysians form geopolitical perceptions of Russia and China by integrating cognitive, experiential, and segmentation-based perspectives. Rather than being driven by immediate reactions or singular factors appear to be shaped through a structured evaluative process, where individuals interpret information through multiple interconnected layers. The findings suggest a relatively consistent evaluative framework in which baseline orientations influence intermediate judgements particularly trust and governance perceptions which then shape views on bilateral relationships before informing overall country evaluations.

While this underlying structure is consistent across both country contexts, the findings reveal important variations in how different factors operate within the model. In particular, the role of trust, governance and social norms, personal exposure, and narrative context differs between Russia and China resulting in distinct patterns of perception formation.

4.3.2.1 Structured Cognitive Evaluation Process

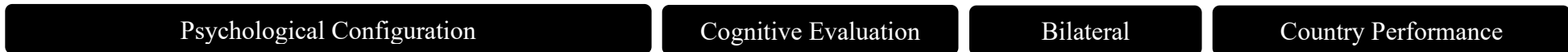
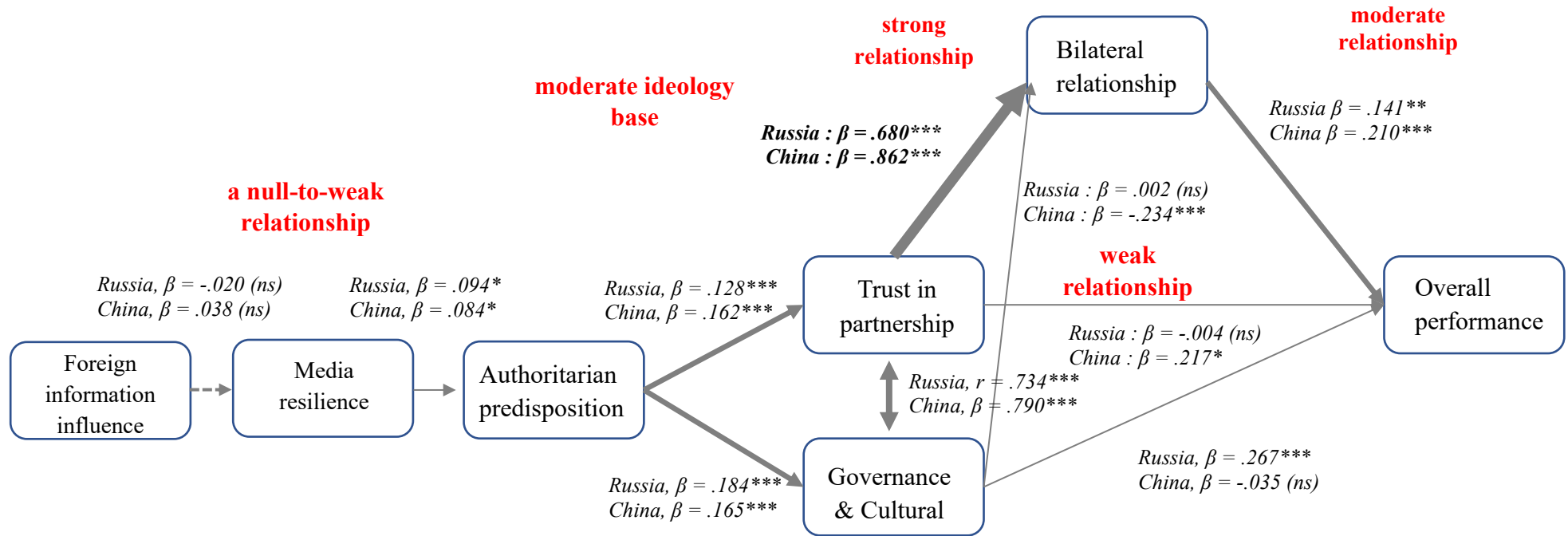
The analysis suggest that Malaysian perceptions are formed through a sequential cognitive mediation model, where individuals do not directly translate ideological beliefs into country evaluations. Instead, authoritarian predisposition operates as a psychological orientation shaping how respondents interpret key evaluative dimensions such as trust and governance.

The model also incorporates an upstream informational layer examining whether foreign information influence and media resilience shape authoritarian predisposition. While foreign information influence does not significantly predict media resilience at the aggregate level in both country models, media resilience itself emerges as a weak but statistically significant predictor of authoritarian predisposition (Russia: $\beta = 0.094$, $p < .05$; China: $\beta = 0.084$, $p < .05$).

Importantly, the direct effect of authoritarian predisposition on overall country evaluation is weak and statistically non-significant in both models (Russia: $\beta = 0.067$, $p > .05$; China: $\beta = 0.057$, $p > .05$). This demonstrates that ideological orientations do not independently dominate final country evaluations once intermediary constructs such as trust, governance perceptions, and bilateral relationship evaluations are accounted for. Instead, the influence of authoritarian predisposition is largely indirect and mediated through subsequent attitudinal layers within the model.

This indicates that ideological orientation is filtered through intermediate constructs, rather than exerting an independent influence. The evaluation pathway—moving from predisposition to trust/governance, then to bilateral perception, and finally to overall evaluation—demonstrates that geopolitical attitudes are layered, mediated, and cognitively structured, rather than immediate or reactive (**See Appendix 4 for detailed analysis**).

Chart 1 Structural Model



Note.
 ns = non-significant; † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.
 β = standardised beta coefficient

4.3.2.2 Trust as the Dominant Driver of Perception

Trust emerges as the central organising mechanism in shaping geopolitical perceptions across both country contexts. Among all explanatory variables included in the structural model, trust in partnership exerts the strongest and most consistent influence on bilateral relationship perceptions. The magnitude of this relationship is substantial in both models, particularly in the China model (Russia: $\beta = 0.680$, $p < .001$; China: $\beta = 0.862$, $p < .001$).

Substantively, trust aggregates perceptions across multiple domains; economic cooperation, security reliability, and institutional credibility into a unified evaluative judgement. Rather than relying heavily on ideological or abstract governance considerations, respondents appear to evaluate countries based on whether they are perceived as reliable and beneficial partners for Malaysia.

The expert interviews strongly reinforce this partnership-based logic in perception formation, where evaluations of major powers are frequently framed through cooperation, economic interdependence, and practical national interest rather than ideological alignment alone.

As an expert interviewed mentioned,

“With China, we have a very strong relationship in terms of technology, trade, etc.”

Similarly, another expert highlighted,

“National interest is based on outcome... even though we become unpopular with some countries, if the outcome benefits us, then that’s our national interest.”

These perspectives suggest that geopolitical evaluations are shaped less by abstract ideological preferences and more by practical assessments of whether a country is viewed as trustworthy, useful, and strategically beneficial to Malaysia.

The stronger effect in the China model suggests that perceptions of China are more tightly structured and internally coherent, with trust acting as a highly consolidated interpretive lens. In contrast, while trust remains dominant for Russia, the slightly lower magnitude indicates a comparatively less centralised perception structure.

A media practitioner interviewed mentioned

“Malaysia is therefore deeply embedded in global supply chains that are centred around both the United States and China...”

Similarly, an expert from a think tank mentioned,

“We’re a trading country. International trade is very important to Malaysia. We are rich because we trade with the world, and we are part of many supply chains.”

These findings suggest that trust toward China is reinforced through sustained economic interaction, structural interdependence, and long-term relational exposure, contributing to a more consolidated and coherent perception structure.

In contrast, while trust remains the dominant explanatory factor within the Russia model, the comparatively lower magnitude indicates a less centralised and less relationally embedded perception structure. This suggests that evaluations toward Russia may rely less on direct experiential familiarity and more on broader geopolitical narratives and indirect informational exposure.

4.3.2.3 Governance and Cultural Norms as a Context-Specific Factors

Governance and cultural norms play a secondary and context-dependent role in shaping perceptions. In the Russia model, governance has no meaningful effect on bilateral relationship perceptions.

In the China model, governance appears as a significant but negative predictor once trust is controlled for. This reflects a statistical suppression effect, driven by the strong overlap between trust and governance constructs. Trust captures the dominant positive evaluation, while governance reflects only the residual variance not explained by trust, resulting in a negative coefficient.

From a substantive perspective, this suggests that governance considerations are not primary drivers of perception, but rather operate in the background. Their influence depends on whether respondents are able or motivated to distinguish between institutional performance and relational trust. In most cases, this distinction is not strongly made, leading to the dominance of trust in the evaluative process.

These perspectives from expert interview reinforce the finding that governance systems themselves are not necessarily the primary object of evaluation. Instead, respondents appear more concerned with whether countries are viewed as capable, beneficial, and strategically useful partners for Malaysia.

“You can disagree with a country's political system but still see them as important economically.”

Together, these findings suggest that governance and cultural norms function more as secondary contextual considerations rather than dominant evaluative drivers.

4.3.2.4 Bilateral Relationship as the Core Evaluative Anchor

Bilateral relationship perception serves as the central mediating mechanism linking cognitive evaluations to overall country assessment. Across both country contexts, perceptions of the Malaysia–Russia and Malaysia–China relationship significantly and positively predict overall country evaluations (Russia: $\beta = 0.141$; China: $\beta = 0.210$).

This reflects a relational mode of evaluation, where perceptions are grounded in pragmatic considerations such as cooperation, alignment, and mutual benefit. Rather than forming abstract global judgements, respondents anchor their views in how a country interacts with Malaysia.

The expert interviews strongly reinforce this relational orientation. Across the interviews, respondents consistently framed geopolitical evaluation through the lens of partnership, engagement, and Malaysia's strategic interests rather than ideological affinity alone.

As an expert and senior diplomat mentioned,

“Foreign policy is not based on emotions. It is based on interests.”

Similarly, a media practitioner also noted,

“Malaysia’s approach has always been practical rather than ideological.”

These perspectives suggest that public evaluations toward foreign countries are closely tied to perceptions of whether bilateral relationships are viewed as beneficial, cooperative, and strategically useful for Malaysia.

The stronger effect for China suggests that this relational anchor is more pronounced and influential, likely due to higher levels of economic integration, visibility, and interaction. This reinforces the importance of relational proximity in shaping perception strength and structure.

4.3.2.5 Personal Exposure as a Structural Differentiator

Personal exposure introduces a critical divergence in how perceptions are formed across the two country contexts. For Russia, the structural model remains invariant across exposure groups, indicating that perceptions are formed consistently regardless of direct experience. This suggests that evaluations of Russia are largely experience-independent and mediated through indirect sources, such as media and general narratives.

In contrast, the China model shows significant variation across exposure groups, demonstrating that personal experience reshapes the evaluative process. Individuals with exposure rely less exclusively on constructs like trust and governance, and instead incorporate more nuanced, experience-based judgements. This leads to a more differentiated and flexible cognitive structure, where multiple factors interact more dynamically.

The expert interviews strongly reinforce this distinction between experiential proximity toward China and the comparatively distant positioning of Russia within the Malaysian context. Across the interviews, China was consistently discussed as deeply embedded within Malaysia's economic, social, and regional environment, whereas Russia was often framed as more distant and less directly connected to everyday Malaysian experience.

As a senior diplomat mentioned,

“China is a production house. Malaysia can only survive by fitting into the ecosystem — semiconductors, SMEs, components.”

These perspectives closely align with the descriptive findings showing substantially higher levels of travel exposure, interaction, and social familiarity with China compared to Russia.

In contrast, Russia was repeatedly described as having a more limited presence within the regional and relational environment experienced by Malaysians.

As mentioned by one of the experts interviewed,

“Russia is important geopolitically, but it is still far from the Malaysian public’s everyday realities.”

These findings suggest that perceptions toward China are formed within a context of sustained relational exposure, economic interaction, and practical familiarity, resulting in a more differentiated and experience-sensitive evaluative structure. In contrast, perceptions toward Russia appear to rely more heavily on mediated narratives and indirect informational interpretation, contributing to a comparatively more stable and abstract perception structure across exposure groups.

4.3.2.6 Media Environment as a Stable Structural Influence

The findings indicate that the Malaysian information environment is consistently media-driven, with social media emerging as the dominant source of geopolitical information across all groups. More than half of respondents rely on social media platforms, followed by television and online news forums.

While exposure introduces some variation—such as increased use of online forums among those with direct experience—the overall relationship between exposure and media consumption is weak. This suggests that media usage patterns are structurally stable, and that exposure does not fundamentally alter how individuals access information.

The expert interviews similarly suggest that Malaysians operate within a highly saturated and overlapping information environment where geopolitical narratives are continuously encountered through multiple media channels. However, several respondents also highlighted that exposure alone does not necessarily determine how individuals interpret or internalise these narratives.

An expert from think tank mentioned,

“People are exposed to many different narratives now, especially online. But exposure alone doesn’t mean they fully believe or accept it.”

Similarly, another media practitioner mentioned,

“Social media gives access to many competing narratives at the same time. People compare, reject, reinterpret, and negotiate information differently.”

These perspectives closely support the finding that informational exposure itself is insufficient to fully explain evaluative orientation or geopolitical preference formation.

Importantly, the structural analysis also demonstrates that foreign information influence does not directly translate into reduced media resilience. Instead, the relationship between information exposure and authoritarian predisposition operates indirectly and weakly through media resilience. This indicates that exposure to foreign narratives alone is insufficient to structurally alter respondents' evaluative orientation. Rather, how individuals process, compare, and interpret information appears to matter more than exposure itself.

The expert interviews strongly reinforce this interpretation. Several respondents emphasised that Malaysians increasingly navigate complex and competing information ecosystems through selective interpretation rather than passive acceptance of external narratives.

As mentioned by one of the respondents,

“People today don’t just consume information passively anymore. They filter information based on their own experiences, beliefs, and trusted sources.”

Similarly, another respondent mentioned,

“Access to information is easy now, but people still choose which narratives they want to trust.”

These findings suggest that the Malaysian information environment is characterised less by direct informational control and more by negotiated interpretation within a crowded and highly mediated digital ecosystem. As a result, exposure to foreign narratives alone appears insufficient to fundamentally restructure geopolitical evaluations without broader relational, cognitive, and contextual reinforcement.

4.3.2.7 Segmented Geopolitical Perception Profiles

The segmentation analysis reveals that Malaysian respondents can be grouped into three distinct geopolitical perception profiles, each reflecting different evaluative orientations. The largest group (71.0%) falls within a Mixed profile, characterised by moderate and balanced views across both countries. This indicates that the overall perception landscape is centred and not highly polarised.

Two smaller segments display clearer directional preferences. The China-favourable group (19.8%) exhibits relatively stronger alignment with China, while the Russia-favourable group (9.2%) represents a smaller and less clearly defined segment.

The distribution of these profiles suggests that while distinct orientations exist, they are not dominant, and most Malaysians maintain a balanced evaluative stance.

4.3.2.8 Asymmetry in Drivers of Geopolitical Alignment

The factors driving alignment with each profile reveal a clear asymmetry between China and Russia.

Alignment with China is more systematically structured, with significant predictors including narrative exposure, ethnicity, gender, and democratic preferences. These factors indicate that

China-related perceptions are embedded within broader social, informational, and identity-based contexts.

In contrast, alignment with Russia is weakly explained, with only limited association observed with past democratic perceptions and most predictors remaining non-significant. This suggests that Russia-related perceptions are less anchored in stable underlying factors, and may be more diffuse or situational.

This asymmetry highlights that China occupies a more salient and structured position within the Malaysian perception landscape, while Russia remains comparatively peripheral.

Overall, the findings suggest that Malaysian geopolitical perceptions are relatively structured, trust-driven, and relationally mediated, trust-driven, and relationally mediated, with important variations introduced by exposure and contextual engagement. While both Russia and China are evaluated through the same underlying cognitive framework, China is perceived through a more experience-sensitive and socially embedded lens, whereas Russia is assessed through a more stable, distant, and media-driven framework (**See Appendix 4 for detailed analysis**).

4.4 Finding 4 : Support, Satisfaction, and Trade-offs in Public Views of Democracy

This section looks at how Malaysians view democracy, including how satisfied they are with how it works, how they see it over time, whether they think it suits the country, and their preferences for different types of government.

The findings show a mixed picture. While fewer than half of respondents say they are satisfied with how democracy is working, a larger share still see Malaysia as a democratic country and want it to remain democratic in the future. At the same time, most respondents agree that democracy is suitable for Malaysia, even if they feel it has some problems.

There is also strong support for democracy as the preferred system of government. However, some respondents are open to other approaches, especially when issues like stability, economic performance, or strong leadership are mentioned.

Overall, the descriptive findings show that support for democracy is present, but views differ across groups, and some respondents are more critical of how it is working today.

This section will discuss these findings in more detail, as outlined in the subsections below (**see Appendix 5**).

4.4.1 Moderate Satisfaction but Stable Democratic Orientation

Asked about their satisfaction with how democracy works in Malaysia, slightly less than half (48%) of respondents indicate that they are satisfied. Dissatisfaction appears more pronounced among Malay (56% dissatisfied) and Indian respondents (55% dissatisfied).

At the same time, when asked to place Malaysia on a scale from completely undemocratic to completely democratic under the present government, a higher proportion—57% of respondents rate the country as democratic (scores 6–10). This perception is stronger among Bumiputera respondents (73%) and BNM (68%), while lower among Indian respondents (44%), pointing to variation in system recognition across groups.

In terms of temporal perceptions, views on democracy appear relatively stable. When asked to assess Malaysia's democratic standing ten years ago, 56% of respondents indicate that the country was democratic, a figure that is closely aligned with current perceptions (57%). Looking ahead, 55% indicate that they would want Malaysia to be highly democratic ten years from now, suggesting continued preference for democracy as the desired system.

However, a distinct pattern emerges among Indian respondents. This group expresses relatively more positive views of the past, with 52% indicating that Malaysia was democratic ten years ago, compared to weaker evaluations of the present, where a majority express dissatisfaction (56% dissatisfied). About 45% of Indian respondents rate Malaysia is moving towards a more undemocratic state when considering the future.

Taken together, while overall perceptions of democracy remain relatively consistent across time, there are notable differences across demographic groups. In particular, the Indian segment appears to reflect a more critical view of current conditions and future trajectory, despite relatively more favourable perceptions of the past.

4.4.2 Democracy Widely Seen as Suitable for Malaysia

When asked to assess the extent to which democracy is suitable for Malaysia, a large majority of respondents express a positive view. Overall, 80% rate democracy as suitable (scores 6–10) indicating a strong level of acceptance of democracy within the Malaysian context.

This broad acceptance of democracy as a suitable system is further reflected in how respondents describe Malaysia's current political system. When asked about their overall perception of democracy in Malaysia, a majority 80% describe it as a democracy with problems (52% minor problems, 28% major problems), while only 11% consider it a full democracy, and 6% say it is not a democracy. This indicates that democracy is largely seen as present and applicable in Malaysia, even if it is perceived to be imperfect in practice.

When compared internationally, respondents generally position Malaysia as relatively democratic. Overall, 64% rate Malaysia as democratic, which is higher than ratings of other countries measured such as China (23%), Russia (22%), United States (44%) and Germany (40%).

4.4.3 Strong Support for Democracy as the Preferred System

Building on the finding that democracy is widely seen as suitable for Malaysia, respondents also show strong support for democracy as the preferred system of government. When asked whether democracy, despite its shortcomings, remains the best form of government, a large majority; 85% of respondents agree.

Support is consistently high across demographic groups. Agreement is particularly strong among Indian respondents (94%), followed by BM (91%) and BNM (90%), while slightly lower—though still substantial—among Malay respondents (81%).

However, it is also interesting to view the perception when respondents are asked to consider specific governance trade-offs. Around one-third of respondents express agreement with statements that reflect openness to non-democratic approaches under certain conditions. For instance, 34% agree that the country needs a leader who can break the rules if necessary, while another 34% agree that maintaining order and stability is more important than whether a government is democratic. In addition, 33% agree that a leader can govern by decree in times of urgency, and 31% agree that economic performance can take precedence over regular elections.

These patterns vary across demographic groups. Agreement with rule-breaking leadership is higher among Chinese respondents (43%) and east Malaysians (MB;49% & NMB; 51%) , while lowest among Malay respondents (25%). Similarly, support for prioritising stability over democracy is more pronounced among BM respondents (58%) and BNM (46%), compared to Malay respondents (29%).

These findings show that while there is generally strong support for democracy as the preferred system, a notable share of respondents remain open to governance trade-offs. In particular, respondents in East Malaysia (BM and BNM) tend to express higher agreement with statements related to strong leadership and stability.

4.4.4 Analytical Insight: Democratic Orientation and Geopolitical Perception

The findings suggest that Malaysians' views on democracy and governance also influence how they evaluate foreign countries particularly China and Russia. In other words, geopolitical perceptions are not formed purely based on economic or foreign policy considerations alone, but are also shaped by broader views about leadership, governance effectiveness, stability, and political systems(See Appendix 4).

The structural analysis shows that respondents with stronger authoritarian predispositions such as prioritising strong leadership, stability, and economic delivery over democratic procedures are slightly more likely to express higher trust and more favourable governance evaluations toward both China and Russia.

For the Russia model, authoritarian predisposition positively predicts trust in partnership ($\beta = 0.128, p < .001$) and governance and cultural norms perceptions ($\beta = 0.184, p < .001$). A similar pattern is observed in the China model, where authoritarian predisposition predicts trust in partnership ($\beta = 0.162, p < .001$) and governance and cultural norms ($\beta = 0.165, p < .001$).

These findings indicate that respondents who are more open toward strong leadership and governance trade-offs are also somewhat more likely to evaluate China and Russia positively particularly in terms of trust and governance-related perceptions. However, the magnitude of these effects remains moderate, suggesting that democratic orientation functions more as a background evaluative lens rather than a dominant determinant of perception.

The expert interviews similarly suggest that Malaysians often evaluate political systems pragmatically, particularly when governance effectiveness, stability, and development outcomes are emphasised. Several respondents noted that support for democratic principles does not necessarily eliminate openness toward strong leadership or performance-oriented governance under certain conditions.

As a media practitioner mentioned,

“People look at what benefits them economically first.”

These perspectives reinforce the finding that positive evaluations toward countries partly emerge from perceptions of state capability, economic delivery, and governance effectiveness rather than direct ideological alignment with authoritarianism itself.

The relationship is more clearly structured in the China model. Trust emerges as the strongest predictor of bilateral relationship perception toward China ($\beta = 0.862, p < .001$), compared to the Russia model ($\beta = 0.680, p < .001$). This suggests that perceptions of China are more strongly tied to broader evaluations about governance effectiveness, economic capability, and relational confidence.

Several expert respondents similarly described China primarily through the lens of development, economic capability, and strategic relevance. As a respondent explained:

“You can disagree with a country's political system but still see them as important economically.”

Similarly, another respondent mentioned,

“Countries don't engage based on ideology alone. They engage because there are practical interests involved.”

Importantly, this does not necessarily mean respondents are directly endorsing authoritarian governance. Rather, many respondents appear to evaluate China through a pragmatic lens where economic development, stability, and perceived state effectiveness shape positive perceptions more strongly than ideological considerations alone.

In contrast, perceptions of Russia appear less systematically connected to democratic orientation. Although authoritarian predisposition remains statistically significant within the Russia model, the broader perception structure is comparatively weaker and less consolidated. This suggests that views toward Russia are shaped more through distant geopolitical narratives and media framing rather than through deeply embedded governance-related evaluations.

The expert interviews similarly suggest that Russia occupies a comparatively more distant and less relationally embedded position within Malaysian public perception. As a media practitioner mentioned,

“Russia is often discussed more symbolically in geopolitical debates rather than through direct Malaysian experience.”

Together, these findings suggest that democratic orientation influences geopolitical evaluations indirectly through broader perceptions of effectiveness, stability, and partnership value rather than through rigid ideological alignment alone.

4.5 Finding 5: Resilience Predictor in Information Processing

In today’s highly digital and fast-moving information environment, individuals are continuously exposed to large volumes of content across multiple platforms, particularly through social media. While this has significantly expanded access to information, it has also increased exposure to misinformation, partial narratives, and unverified content. In such a context, the ability to critically assess and verify information becomes essential for informed decision-making.

This section examines resilience of respondents in processing information. Rather than focusing solely on awareness or knowledge, this section captures how individuals engage with information—shaping not only what they believe, but also how they respond to and act on the content they encounter. To study this section, the following items were selected (**See Appendix 6**).

To assess this, the analysis is structured around three key dimensions: information exposure, information ecosystem, and verification behaviour. Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals navigate the information environment and the extent to which they are equipped to manage misinformation and information bias.

It is important to note that this section provides a descriptive assessment of resilience and does not model its structural role in shaping geopolitical perceptions.

4.5.1 Widespread Use of Social Media Platforms

Findings indicate that Malaysians operate within a highly digitalised information environment, with social media platforms forming the primary channel of daily engagement. Usage is near-universal for certain platforms, particularly WhatsApp, which records almost complete penetration (98%). Other major platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram also show high levels of usage.

In addition to platform usage, respondents report substantial time spent on social media. A notable proportion indicate usage of three or more hours per day, with some reporting five hours or more daily. This suggests that engagement with digital platforms is not occasional but forms a regular and sustained part of daily routines.

Higher time spent reflects greater exposure to content, including news and information encountered through these platforms. While the data does not specify content type directly, the duration of usage indicates that individuals are frequently exposed to information within digital environments. The data further shows that respondents are typically active on more than one platform, rather than relying on a single source. The combination of high usage across platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok indicates that exposure is distributed across different channels. This suggests that individuals encounter information through multiple digital touchpoints.

The expert interviews similarly suggest that Malaysians increasingly navigate an information environment characterised by constant digital exposure and overlapping streams of information across multiple platforms.

As mentioned by one respondent,

“People today are receiving information from everywhere at the same time social media, WhatsApp groups, short videos, online portals.”

Similarly, another respondent also noted,

“Social media is already part of everyday life. People don’t just use one platform anymore. They move across different platforms throughout the day.”

These perspectives reinforce the finding that digital exposure is highly embedded within everyday routines and that information consumption increasingly occurs across multiple interconnected digital touchpoints rather than through a single dominant source.

4.5.2 Information Ecosystem: Sources of News and Information

Within this high-exposure environment, social media platforms emerge as the dominant source of news. For local news, 48% of respondents identify social media as their main source, compared to 25% who rely on television, while smaller proportions turn to news websites or forums (8%), printed newspapers (7%), and radio (6%). A similar pattern is observed for

international news, where 46% rely on social media, followed by 23% television and 11% news websites or forums.

Within social media, specific platforms play a more prominent role in shaping news exposure. For local news, Facebook is the most cited platform (51% within social media users), followed by TikTok (35%), with smaller shares for YouTube and Instagram. A similar distribution is observed for international news, where Facebook (46%) and TikTok (36%) remain the leading platforms.

At the same time, respondents identify social media as the main source of misinformation. For local information, 57% indicate social media as the primary source of fake or inaccurate news, followed by websites (17%) and newspapers (8%). A similar pattern is observed for international information, where 52% identify social media, compared to 17% for websites. This indicates that the same platforms that dominate news consumption are also perceived as the main channels through which misinformation is encountered.

The expert interviews similarly highlight the increasingly complex and crowded nature of the digital information ecosystem.

As explained by one respondent,

“The problem now is not lack of information. People are overloaded with information from too many sources.”

Another respondent also mentioned,

“People are exposed to competing narratives every day, especially online.”

These findings suggest that Malaysians operate within an information ecosystem where multiple narratives compete simultaneously for attention, making information navigation increasingly complex.

When asked about responsibility for ensuring accurate news, respondents express a distributed view. 42% believe news organisations should be responsible, while 31% place responsibility on individuals, and 23% attribute responsibility to the government.

4.5.3 Verification Behaviour: Information Checking and Evaluation Practices

Against this backdrop, verification behaviour among Malaysians is moderate. Just over half (53%) report that they verify news or information before sharing, while a substantial 37% indicate that they do not verify. This suggests that while verification practices are present, they are not universally adopted.

Among respondents who verify information, the methods used are relatively straightforward. The most common approach is checking across multiple media platforms (21%), followed by searching on Google (17%) and checking through reliable sources such as official news portals (17%). Other methods are less frequently used, including asking others for their opinion (10%), self-review and analysis (7%), and checking directly on social media platforms (5%). More

specific approaches, such as comparing with television news (3%) or referring to official government channels (1%), are used by only a small proportion.

These patterns indicate that while verification does occur, it is largely based on general cross-checking behaviour rather than structured or in-depth evaluation, suggesting variability in how rigorously information is assessed.

Beyond verification, respondents report relatively cautious sharing behaviour. A majority (76%) indicate that they only share news after reading and verifying the content, while 15% admit to sharing news based only on headlines. At the same time, the variety of methods reported indicates that verification is not standardised, and individuals rely on different approaches depending on convenience or familiarity.

When evaluating international news, 75% report that they check multiple sources before believing such information, while 25% do not, indicating that cross-referencing behaviour is relatively widespread but not consistently applied. Similarly, 65% indicate that they compare Malaysian news with trusted foreign media, suggesting that a majority engage in some level of comparative evaluation.

Respondents also report relatively high levels of confidence in their ability to distinguish between factual reporting and propaganda, with 72% expressing confidence in identifying such differences

The expert interviews similarly suggest that Malaysians increasingly adopt selective and comparative approaches when engaging with information online.

As explained by one media expert interviewed,

“People don’t just believe one source anymore. They compare information across different platforms before deciding what to trust.”

Similarly, another respondent noted

“People compare, reject, reinterpret, and negotiate information differently.”

These findings reinforce the observation that information processing increasingly involves comparison, selective interpretation, and individual judgement rather than passive information acceptance.

4.5.4 Media Resilience and Governance Orientation

The structural analysis further suggests that media resilience may have a limited but meaningful relationship with broader governance orientation. While foreign information influence itself does not significantly predict media resilience across both country models,

media resilience demonstrates a weak but statistically consistent association with authoritarian predisposition. (See Appendix 4).

In the Russia model, media resilience positively predicts authoritarian predisposition ($\beta = 0.094, p < .05$), while a similar pattern is observed in the China model ($\beta = 0.084, p < .05$).

However, the magnitude of these relationships remains weak. The findings therefore do not suggest that exposure to foreign narratives directly reduces resilience or increases authoritarian orientation. Instead, they indicate that information-processing behaviour and governance orientation may be weakly interconnected within a broader cognitive evaluation process.

Importantly, foreign information influence itself does not significantly predict media resilience in either the Russia or China models. This suggests that exposure to foreign narratives alone is insufficient to structurally alter respondents' resilience levels. Rather, resilience appears to function more as an individual information-processing characteristic than as a direct outcome of external informational exposure.

The expert interviews similarly reinforce the idea that exposure alone does not automatically determine belief formation or political orientation.

As explained by one expert,

“People are exposed to many different narratives now, especially online. But exposure alone doesn’t mean they fully believe or accept it.”

Similarly, another respondent also noted

“People filter information based on their own experiences, beliefs, and trusted sources.”

These findings support the interpretation that information resilience is shaped less by simple informational exposure and more by how individuals interpret, compare, and contextualise competing narratives.

4.5.5 Relational Embedding as the Key Differentiating Mechanism

One of the central findings emerging from this study is that exposure alone is insufficient to meaningfully explain how Malaysians form geopolitical perceptions. While Malaysians operate within a highly digitalised and information-saturated environment where 48% rely on social media as their primary source of local news and 46% for international news, the findings consistently show that informational exposure by itself does not automatically translate into stronger trust, favourable evaluations, or ideological alignment toward foreign countries.

Instead, the analysis suggests that relational embedding plays a more important role in shaping how geopolitical perceptions are formed and interpreted. Countries that are socially,

economically, and experientially embedded within Malaysians' everyday lives are evaluated differently from countries that remain distant and abstract.

This distinction is most clearly reflected in the comparative differences between the China and Russia models. Although both countries are major geopolitical actors frequently discussed within global media environments, Malaysians demonstrate substantially higher levels of relational and experiential exposure toward China. Approximately 23% of respondents report having visited China, while 37% report prior interaction with Chinese nationals. In contrast, only 1.8% report visiting Russia and only 6.8% report prior interaction with Russian nationals. These findings indicate that China occupies a far more socially embedded position within the Malaysian context.

The expert interviews strongly reinforce this distinction between relational proximity and distant informational exposure.

As mentioned by a senior diplomat interviewed,

“China’s presence in the region is something Malaysia cannot ignore because it affects trade, investment, and the economy directly.”

These perspectives closely align with the structural findings showing that perceptions toward China are more relationally embedded, experience-sensitive, and internally differentiated, while perceptions toward Russia remain comparatively more abstract and narrative-driven.

As a result, perceptions toward China are significantly more differentiated, experience-sensitive, and relationally structured. The multigroup analysis demonstrates that the China model varies significantly across exposure groups ($\Delta\chi^2(11) = 25.221, p = .008$), indicating that direct experience meaningfully reshapes how respondents evaluate China. Individuals with higher exposure demonstrate stronger and more internally differentiated relationships between trust, governance perception, and bilateral relationship evaluation.

This pattern is also reflected in the structural pathways. In the China model, trust strongly predicts bilateral relationship perception ($\beta = 0.862, p < .001$), substantially stronger than in the Russia model ($\beta = 0.680, p < .001$). This suggests that perceptions toward China are more deeply embedded within relational and experiential evaluations involving familiarity, cooperation, and perceived mutual benefit.

In contrast, perceptions toward Russia remain comparatively stable regardless of exposure level. The Russia model demonstrates structural invariance across exposure groups ($\Delta\chi^2(11) = 12.031, p = .361$), suggesting that direct experience does not substantially alter how respondents evaluate Russia. Instead, perceptions of Russia appear more dependent on indirect narratives, mediated informational exposure, and symbolic geopolitical framing rather than lived or relational engagement.

Importantly, these findings suggest that geopolitical influence is not determined purely by informational visibility or media exposure. Although exposure to geopolitical content is widespread, influence appears to become more meaningful and cognitively embedded when exposure is reinforced through relational proximity, economic engagement, interpersonal interaction, and everyday familiarity.

This interpretation is further supported by the media resilience findings. While respondents report relatively high levels of information verification behaviour with 75% indicating that they compare multiple sources before believing international news and 72% expressing confidence in distinguishing factual reporting from propaganda exposure to foreign narratives itself does not significantly predict media resilience in either the Russia model ($\beta = -0.020$, ns) or China model ($\beta = 0.038$, ns).

Overall, the findings suggest that relational embedding rather than exposure alone is the key mechanism differentiating how geopolitical perceptions are formed within the Malaysian context. Geopolitical evaluations are therefore not simply products of information consumption, but emerge through broader processes of social familiarity, trust formation, relational experience, and contextual interpretation.

5.0 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While this study provides a comprehensive assessment of how Malaysians form geopolitical perceptions toward China and Russia, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

First, while the study incorporates indicators related to information exposure, media resilience, and foreign informational influence, the structural effects observed remain relatively weak particularly in the pathway linking media resilience and authoritarian predisposition. The findings therefore should not be interpreted as evidence that exposure to foreign narratives directly alters democratic orientation or significantly weakens media resilience. Rather, the results suggest the presence of limited and indirect psychological associations within a broader evaluative framework.

Second, the study measures foreign informational influence primarily through perception-based indicators rather than direct exposure to identifiable information operations or coordinated influence campaigns. Future studies may benefit from incorporating digital trace data, platform-level exposure analysis, or experimental designs to better isolate the effects of specific informational environments.

Third, although the study identifies several distinct geopolitical perception profiles, the segmentation analysis remains exploratory in nature. The identified profiles capture broad evaluative tendencies within the Malaysian population, but they should not be interpreted as fixed ideological categories. Individual perceptions remain dynamic and may shift over time

in response to changing geopolitical events, domestic political developments, economic conditions, or media narratives.

Fourth, the study focuses specifically on perceptions toward China and Russia within the Malaysian context. While these two countries provide useful comparative cases for understanding geopolitical perception formation, the findings may not be directly generalisable to perceptions toward other major powers or geopolitical actors. Future comparative research involving additional countries such as the United States, European Union, or regional ASEAN actors may provide a broader understanding of how Malaysians navigate competing geopolitical narratives.

Finally, although the study combines descriptive findings with advanced structural modelling, geopolitical perception remains a highly complex and evolving process shaped by multiple interacting factors including historical memory, ethnicity, religion, economic conditions, media systems, domestic political context, and global developments. The current study provides a structured framework for understanding these relationships, but it does not fully exhaust all possible explanatory dimensions.

Future research may therefore expand this framework to better understand how geopolitical perceptions evolve over time within increasingly digital and fragmented information environments.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Malaysia's geopolitical perception landscape must first be understood within its national context. As a multi-cultural society with relatively higher levels of education, Malaysians engage with global issues from a position that is both socially diverse and informationally connected.

At the same time, Malaysia is strategically situated within a complex geopolitical environment, positioned between multiple major and influential actors. While China and Russia form the core focus of this study, Malaysians are concurrently exposed to and influenced by a broader set of global players—including the United States, India, the Middle East (particularly through cultural and religious linkages), and the west. This creates a highly plural and competing narrative space, where no single geopolitical perspective dominates completely.

Against this backdrop, the findings of this study show that geopolitical perceptions in Malaysia are not random or purely exposure-driven, but instead emerge through a structured, mediated, and context-dependent process. The following sections summarise the conclusions based on each of the study's core objectives.

7.1 Objective 1: Information Environment and Engagement with Global Narratives

The study finds that Malaysians operate within a highly digital and platform-driven information environment, where social media functions as the primary gateway to both local and international news. Exposure to global content is frequent, continuous, and multi-platform in nature, with individuals engaging across channels such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube.

However, a critical distinction emerges between exposure and awareness. While Malaysians are regularly exposed to global narratives, this does not translate into consistent or deep understanding. Awareness remains uneven and is strongly shaped by issue salience and media visibility. Highly prominent issues receive attention, while equally important but less visible developments remain under-recognised.

7.2 Objective 2: Awareness and Interpretation of Global Developments

Malaysians demonstrate a broad recognition of global structural change, particularly the shift toward a multipolar world. This suggests that macro-level geopolitical narratives are reaching the public. However, this awareness remains largely conceptual rather than substantive. Knowledge of specific geopolitical mechanisms—such as BRICS—is limited, revealing a gap between general understanding and institutional literacy.

Public responses to global developments also reflect a pragmatic and cautious orientation. While there is openness to diversified international engagement (e.g., support for joining BRICS), this is balanced by concerns over geopolitical risks, including tensions with major powers and implications for national neutrality.

Overall, Malaysians are aware but not deeply anchored in their understanding of global systems, engaging with international developments at a broad interpretive level rather than a detailed analytical one.

7.3 Objective 3: Perceptions of China and Russia

The findings demonstrate that public perceptions toward China and Russia are clearly differentiated and asymmetrical.

China is viewed more favourably overall, particularly in relation to economic cooperation, development, and bilateral relations with Malaysia. This reflects China's stronger economic, social, and experiential presence within the Malaysian context. However, these positive evaluations remain selective. While many respondents express trust in China as an economic

partner and acknowledge its developmental success, this does not fully translate into ideological endorsement of its political system.

Russia, in contrast, occupies a comparatively more peripheral and less clearly defined position within Malaysian public perception. Evaluations of Russia are weaker, less differentiated, and more dependent on indirect narratives and media framing rather than lived experience or relational familiarity.

Across both country contexts, Malaysians demonstrate selective acceptance of geopolitical narratives. Exposure does not automatically produce agreement. Instead, respondents actively interpret information through their own experiences, trusted sources, relational understanding, and broader contextual considerations.

This suggests that geopolitical perceptions in Malaysia are differentiated, conditional, and shaped by contextual relevance rather than being uniformly driven by informational exposure alone.

7.4 Objective 4: Drivers of Geopolitical Perception

The analysis suggests the presence of a relatively structured cognitive model underlying how Malaysians form geopolitical perceptions.

At the core of this model is trust, which emerges as the most dominant and consistent driver across both country contexts. Trust functions as a central interpretive lens, integrating perceptions across economic, security, and institutional domains.

Other factors, such as governance and ideological predisposition, play secondary and context-dependent roles. Their influence is largely mediated through trust rather than operating independently.

Importantly, perceptions are not formed directly. Instead, they follow a sequential evaluative pathway:

- Baseline orientations → Trust and governance evaluations → Bilateral relationship perception → Overall country evaluation

This confirms that geopolitical attitudes are **layered, mediated, and cognitively structured**, rather than immediate or reactive.

7.5 Objective 5: Role of Personal Exposure and Experience

Personal exposure introduces a critical structural distinction in how perceptions are formed. For Russia, perceptions remain stable and experience-independent, reflecting limited direct exposure. Evaluations are primarily shaped by media narratives and indirect information, resulting in a more uniform and abstract perception structure.

For China, higher levels of exposure through travel, interaction, and economic presence lead to more differentiated and experience-conditioned perceptions. Individuals incorporate personal experience into their evaluations, producing a more flexible and nuanced cognitive structure.

This demonstrates that relational proximity, rather than exposure alone, is the key differentiating factor. Countries that are embedded in lived experience are evaluated differently from those that remain distant.

7.6 Objective 6: Segmentation of Geopolitical Perception Profiles

The Malaysian public can be grouped into **three distinct perception profiles**:

- A dominant **Mixed group (71%)**, reflecting balanced and moderate views
- A **China-favourable segment (19.8%)**
- A smaller **Russia-favourable segment (9.2%)**

The dominance of the Mixed group indicates that the overall perception landscape is centred and not highly polarised.

Importantly, the drivers of alignment differ across profiles. Alignment with China is more structured and predictable, linked to demographic, experiential, and informational factors. In contrast, alignment with Russia is less systematically explained, suggesting weaker anchoring in stable underlying drivers.

This asymmetry reinforces the finding that China occupies a more salient and socially embedded position, while Russia remains comparatively diffuse and marginal in public perception.

7.7 Objective 7: Attitudes Toward Democracy and Governance

Malaysians continue to demonstrate strong normative support for democracy, with a large majority affirming it as the most suitable and preferred system of governance. However, this support is accompanied by moderate satisfaction with democratic performance, reflecting concerns about governance effectiveness, stability, and delivery.

A key pattern is the emergence of conditional flexibility. While democratic principles remain widely accepted, a notable proportion of respondents express openness to governance trade-offs—particularly in relation to strong leadership, stability, and economic outcomes.

This indicates a distinction between democratic ideals and lived experience:

- Democracy is valued as a system
- But its performance is critically evaluated

7.8 Overall Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of how Malaysians form geopolitical perceptions within a highly digitalised and media-saturated information environment. Overall, the findings converge on a central conclusion: geopolitical perceptions are not shaped by exposure alone, but through a structured, trust-driven, and relationally mediated cognitive process.

Perception formation appears to operate through a layered evaluative framework in which trust functions as the central organising mechanism. Rather than translating informational exposure directly into attitudes, Malaysians interpret geopolitical developments through intermediary constructs particularly trust, governance evaluation, and bilateral relationship perception before arriving at overall country assessments.

At the same time, while both China and Russia are evaluated through this shared cognitive structure, they occupy fundamentally different positions within it. China is interpreted through a more relationally proximate, experience-sensitive, and socially embedded framework reflecting its stronger economic, social, and experiential presence within Malaysia. Russia, by contrast, is evaluated through a more distant, abstract, and media-driven framework.

The findings also suggest that influence is not determined by exposure alone. The effectiveness of geopolitical narratives depends on their perceived credibility, relational relevance, experiential grounding, and alignment with existing evaluative structures. Malaysians therefore do not passively absorb geopolitical narratives, but actively interpret, negotiate, and selectively accept competing informational frames.

In conclusion, Malaysian geopolitical perceptions are systematic, differentiated, and context-dependent. They reflect a public that is neither fully insulated from global influence nor passively shaped by it, but one that actively navigates and interprets an increasingly complex and contested global information landscape.

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APPENDIX 1

Survey Items Used to Examine Media Exposure and Awareness of Global Developments

Category	Survey Question
Source of Local News	Q: Please tell me TWO (2) sources/channels you consider to be your main source of information for local news.
Source of International News	Q: Please tell me THREE (3) sources/channels you consider to be your main source of information for international news.
Interest in Global Affairs	Q: How far are you interested in following the news on international events and developments?
Exposure to Geopolitical Narratives	Q: In the past month, have you been exposed to online content claiming that Western countries caused/continue to back the Russia–Ukraine war?
Awareness of Global Developments	Q: Of the following international events that are currently ongoing, please give a score between 1–5 in terms of how closely you are aware of what is going on.
Awareness of MH17	Q: Are you aware of the MH17 tragedy that occurred in 2014?
Attribution of Responsibility (MH17)	Q: (If aware) Do you think that Russia is responsible for the MH17 tragedy?
Awareness of South China Sea Developments	Q: How would you rate your awareness and knowledge about events and developments occurring in the South China Sea?

APPENDIX 2

Survey Items Used to Examine Foreign Relations and Regional Issues

Category	Survey Question
Perceptions of Global Multipolarity	Q: Do you agree that the world system is moving towards multipolarity, namely a situation where world power is no longer controlled by just one country but is divided between several large countries?
Awareness of BRICS (Knowledge on BRICS)	Q: How much do you know about BRICS?
Perceptions of BRICS and Its Implications	Q: How would you describe Russia's role in BRICS? To what extent do you agree or disagree that Malaysia should join BRICS? Q: How likely do you think Malaysia joining BRICS would create tensions with the United States? Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree that joining BRICS would affect Malaysia's neutrality?

APPENDIX 3

Survey Items Used to Measure Narratives Related to China and Russia

Category	Survey Question
China as a Governance Role Model	Q: Should China serve as a governance model for Malaysia?
Russia as a Governance Role Model	Q: Should Russia serve as a governance model for Malaysia?
Trust in Russia as Economic Partner	Q: How much do you trust Russia as an economic partner for Malaysia?
Trust in China as Economic Partner	Q: How much do you trust China as an economic partner for Malaysia?
Authoritarian Growth Model	Q: China's rapid economic growth shows that an authoritarian system can deliver better results than democracy
China Development Model	Q: Malaysia should emulate China's development model
Trust in Russia as Security and Defence Partner	Q: How much do you trust Russia as a security and defence partner for Malaysia?
Trust in China as Security and Defence Partner	Q: How much do you trust China as a security and defence partner for Malaysia?
Direction of Malaysia–Russia Relations	Q: In your view, do you think Malaysia's relationship with Russia is heading in the right or wrong direction?
Direction of Malaysia–China Relations	Q: In your view, do you think Malaysia's relationship with China is heading in the right or wrong direction?
Russia Treatment of Muslim Minorities	Q: Government is tolerant in treatment towards Muslim minority and its cultural and religious identities in Chechnya?
China Treatment of Muslim Minorities	Q: Government is tolerant in treatment towards Muslim Uyghur minority and its cultural and religious identities in Xinjiang?
Trust in Official Chinese Government Media	Q: Trust in Chinese government media
Trust in Official Russian Government Media	Q: Trust in Russian government media
Trust in Malaysian Mainstream Media	Q: Trust in Malaysian mainstream media
Perceptions of Media and Geopolitical Bias	Q: Western media unfairly demonizes Russia/China
Experience of Visiting Russia and China	Q: Have you visited any of these countries?
Interaction with Russia and China	Q: Have you had any interaction with.....in the past?

APPENDIX 4

Q1: Which factor has the strongest influence on bilateral relationship perceptions and overall country evaluation?

Perceptions of Russia and China were measured using comparative items capturing overall performance, bilateral relationship, trust in partnership, governance/ cultural norms, and authoritarian predisposition across multiple domains (see Appendix 1 for dimensions and items). A structural model was employed to test the conceptualised model to identify which factor has stronger effect on the bilateral relationship and country overall performance. Overall, the model demonstrated acceptable to good fit for both country-specific models¹ (CFI and TLI \geq .90 indicate acceptable fit and \geq .95 excellent fit; RMSEA \leq .08 acceptable fit and \leq .06 good fit; SRMR \leq .08 acceptable fit).

Standardized factor loadings were generally above the recommended threshold of 0.60, indicating acceptable indicator reliability across both models. In the Russia model, factor loadings ranged from 0.592 to 0.843, while in the China model, loadings ranged from 0.601 to 0.833, demonstrating satisfactory item-level reliability.

Convergent validity was assessed using Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Across both the Russia and China models, media resilience showed strong reliability and validity (CR = 0.824; AVE = 0.611), while trust in partnership also demonstrated strong performance (CR = 0.819; AVE = 0.602). Governance/ cultural norms showed acceptable reliability (CR = 0.686; AVE = 0.524), though the lower CR reflects its two-item measurement. Authoritarian Predisposition demonstrated acceptable reliability (CR = 0.756–0.758) but relatively weak convergent validity (AVE = 0.439) in both models.

Discriminant validity was evaluated using the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio. All construct pairs had HTMT values below the conservative threshold of 0.85, indicating adequate discriminant validity. The highest HTMT values were observed between trust in partnership and governance/ cultural norms domains (HTMT \approx 0.43), reflecting a moderate relationship but remaining well within acceptable limits. These results support the distinctiveness of the constructs included in the model.

Overall, the measurement model demonstrated satisfactory reliability, model fit, and discriminant validity, with some limitations in convergent validity for governance and cultural norms construct (in China model) and authoritarian predisposition.

Table 1 presents the structural path estimates for both the Russia and China models, revealing relationships that range from weak to highly robust in magnitude. Crucially, several critical pathways maintain high statistical significance across both national contexts. This framework maps the respondents' cognitive process across four sequential phases: Psychological Configuration, Cognitive Evaluation, Bilateral Perception, and Country Performance Evaluation. By tracking the statistical

¹ For the Russia model, $\chi^2(81) = 329.799$, with a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of .956 and a Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) of .943, indicating good model fit. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was .050 and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was .051, both within recommended thresholds.

For the China model, $\chi^2(81) = 391.051$, CFI = .945, and TLI = .929, indicating an acceptable level of fit. The RMSEA value of .056 and SRMR of .042 were also within acceptable limits, though comparatively weaker than those observed for the Russia model.

variations across these phases, the model demonstrates how structural and psychological inputs are progressively filtered through internal belief systems to generate final country evaluations.

Table 1 Structural paths (standardized estimates) for China and Russia models

Structural paths (standardized estimates)	Russia Model	China Model
Stage 1: Psychological Configuration		
Foreign Information Influence → Media resilience	.020 (ns)	-.038 (ns)
Media resilience → Authoritarian predisposition	.094*	.084*
Stage 2: Cognitive Evaluation		
Authoritarian predisposition → Trust in partnership	.128***	.162***
Authoritarian predisposition → Governance & cultural norms	.184***	.165***
Stage 3: Bilateral Perception		
Trust in partnership → Bilateral relationship	.680***	.862***
Governance & cultural norms → Bilateral relationship	.002 (ns)	-.234***
Authoritarian predisposition → Bilateral relationship	.041 (ns)	.052 (+)
Stage 4: Country Performance Evaluation		
Trust dimensions → Overall country performance	-.004 (ns)	.217*
Governance & cultural norms → Overall country performance	.267***	-.035 (ns)
Bilateral relationship → Overall country performance	.141**	.210***
Authoritarian Predisposition → Overall country performance	.067 (ns)	.057 (+)

*Note. ns = non-significant; † p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.*

1. Foreign Information Influence² and Media Resilience³ → Authoritarian Predisposition

The initial stage of the model evaluates the structural inputs shaping media resilience and, subsequently, authoritarian predisposition. Across both national contexts, foreign information influence does not significantly predict media resilience in either model, indicating that perceived external informational exposure does not directly shape individuals' media resilience levels.

In contrast, media resilience emerges as a consistent, yet weak, predictor of authoritarian predisposition across both contexts.

- Russia: $\beta = .094$, $p < .05$
- China: $\beta = .084$, $p < .05$

These findings suggest that higher levels of media resilience are associated with slightly stronger authoritarian predisposition, indicating a weak but statistically consistent psychological linkage across both models. The minimal difference between coefficients further highlights a stable structural relationship that operates consistently across both national contexts.

² Indicators:

Foreign Information Influence

1- Russia engages in online propaganda targeting Malaysia < RUSSIA> 2- China Intervenes in Malaysian media reporting < CHINA>

³ Media resilience predictors

1- I regularly check multiple sources before believing international news. 2- I often compare Malaysian news with trusted foreign media. 3- I am confident in my ability to distinguish factual reporting from propaganda.

Overall, the results indicate that while foreign information influence does not play a significant role in shaping media resilience, media resilience itself maintains a small but consistent effect on authoritarian predisposition across both Russia and China specifications.

2. Authoritarian Predisposition⁴ → Trust in partnership⁵ and Governance & Cultural Norms

The second stage of the model evaluates whether an individual's internal authoritarian predisposition shapes their baseline evaluations of trust dimensions and governance & cultural norms. Across both country contexts, an authoritarian predisposition acts as a statistically significant, consistent predictor of these intermediary evaluative variables.

For Russia, authoritarian predisposition significantly predicts trust in partnership ($\beta = 0.128, p < .001$) and governance & cultural norms perceptions ($\beta = 0.184, p < .001$). A similar pattern is observed for China, with significant effects on trust dimensions ($\beta = 0.162, p < .001$) and governance & cultural norms ($\beta = 0.165, p < .001$).

While the p-values indicate statistical significance and consistency across models, the relatively modest β -coefficients suggest that the direct influence of authoritarian predisposition on baseline evaluations is limited in magnitude.

3. Trust in partnership → Bilateral Relationship Perception (Malaysia < > Russia/ China)

The third stage of the model demonstrates that trust is the dominant predictor of bilateral relationship perceptions in both country contexts.

Trust dimensions has a substantial and statistically significant effect:

- Russia: $\beta = 0.680, p < .001$
- China: $\beta = 0.862, p < .001$

These findings indicate that trust functions as the primary interpretive mechanism through which respondents evaluate Malaysia's relationship with both countries. The stronger effect in the China model suggests that trust plays an especially central role in structuring perceptions of China compared to Russia.

⁴ Indicators

Authoritarian predisposition

1- In order to solve the country's urgent problems, a leader can govern the country by decrees and disregard the parliament if necessary 2- As long as a government can solve our country's economic problem, it does not matter if the government holds regular elections or not 3- This country needs a leader who can break the rules if necessary to get things done. 4- As long as the government can maintain order and stability in the country, it does not matter whether it is democratic or undemocratic

⁵ Trust in partnership

In your view, do you think Malaysia's relationship with < > is heading in the right or wrong direction?

1- Economic partner for Malaysia 2- Security and defence partner for Malaysia 3- Educational partner for Malaysia

4. Governance & cultural norms⁶ → Bilateral Relationship Perception

This finding shows a fascinating difference between how respondents view Russia and China. For Russia, governance has no meaningful effect on perceptions of the bilateral relationship ($\beta = 0.002$, $p = .967$), indicating no independent explanatory power in this context. In contrast, for China, governance has a statistically significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.234$, $p < .001$). This suggests that, after controlling for trust, respondents who report stronger governance-related evaluations tend to view the Malaysia–China relationship slightly less positively.

Importantly, this pattern should be interpreted in light of the strong covariance between trust and governance in both models (Russia: $r = .734$; China: $r = .790$), indicating substantial shared variance between the two constructs. The negative coefficient for governance in the China model likely reflects a suppression effect resulting from this high overlap with trust. Because both constructs share considerable variance, trust captures the general positive evaluation component, whereas governance reflects the remaining unique variance after this shared component is partialled out, which can produce a negative net effect in the structural model.

5. Bilateral Relationship → Overall Country Evaluation

The final stage of the structural model demonstrates that bilateral relationship perceptions significantly and directly predict overall country evaluations across both contexts. Bilateral perceptions influence a highly significant positive effect on final evaluations, maintaining a stable impact in the Russia and a visibly stronger presence in the China model.

- Russia: $\beta = 0.141$, $p < .001$
- China: $\beta = 0.210$, $p < .001$

These findings confirm that perceived bilateral relations are a key mediating mechanism linking intermediate evaluations to overall country assessments. The stronger effect in the China model suggests that relational perceptions are particularly influential in shaping evaluations of China.

6. Direct Effects of Authoritarian Predisposition

The direct path from an authoritarian predisposition to the overall country evaluation provides critical insight into the structural architecture of the model. This direct effect is not statistically significant in both national contexts

- Russia: $\beta = 0.067$, $p > .05$
- China: $\beta = 0.057$, $p > .05$

These results indicate that an authoritarian predisposition does not directly dominate final country evaluations once trust dimensions, governance and cultural norms, and bilateral relationship perceptions are accounted for. Instead, its primary influence operates indirectly through the sequential attitudinal structure of the model. This statistical pattern demonstrates a strong mediation structure in both models, suggesting that worldviews must first be translated into trust and relational perceptions before they can shape an individual's final evaluation of a foreign nation.

⁶ Indicators

Governance & cultural norms

- 1- Provides useful alternatives to democratic system in terms of values and governance ;
- 2- Government is tolerant in treatment towards <CHINA>Muslim Uyghur minority and its cultural and religious identities in Xinjiang? <RUSSIA>Muslim minority and its cultural and religious identities in Chechnya?

7. Overall Interpretation of the Structural Model

Overall, the empirical evidence strongly validates a sequential cognitive mediation model of foreign country evaluation across both the Russia and China contexts.

The model operates as follows:

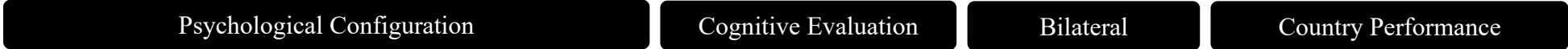
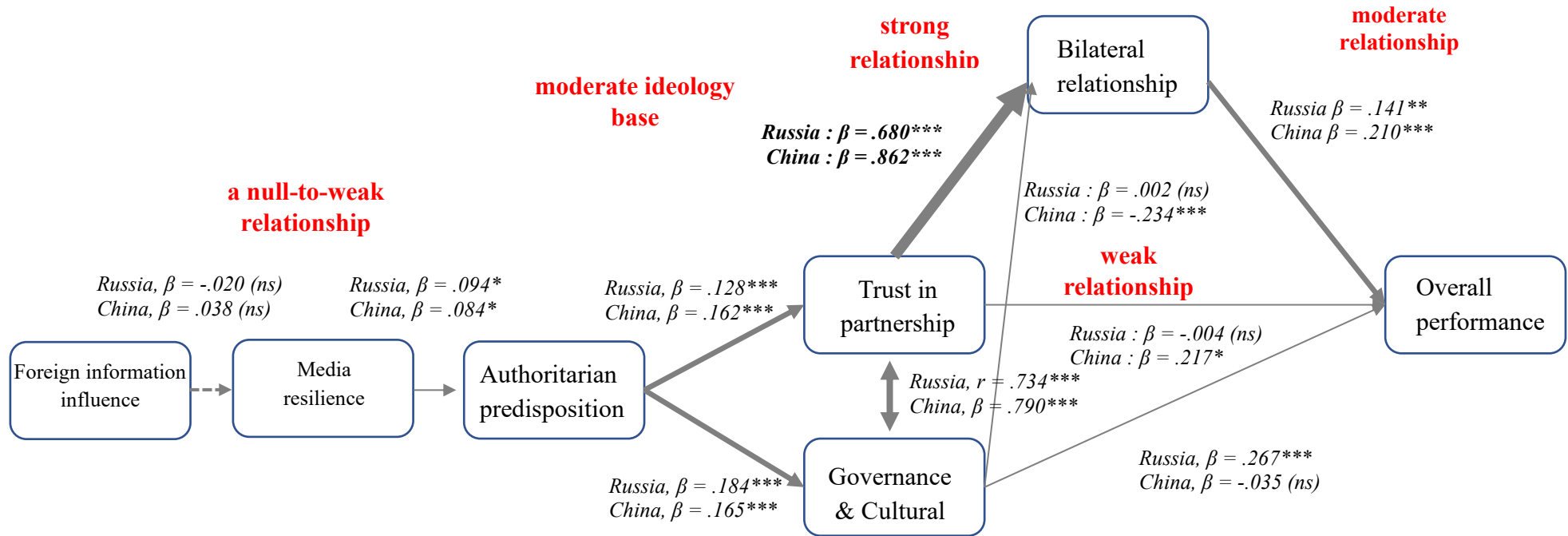
1. Foreign information influence does not significantly predict media resilience
2. Media resilience emerges as a consistent, yet weak, predictor of authoritarian predisposition
3. Authoritarian predisposition shapes trust and governance & cultural norms perceptions
4. These institutional perceptions shape bilateral relationship evaluations
5. Bilateral evaluations then shape overall country evaluations

A key finding across both models is that foreign information influence does not significantly predict media resilience, suggesting no meaningful association with variation in media resilience levels. Media resilience does not operate as a substantive mediator of external informational exposure, but instead shows a small yet statistically consistent association with authoritarian predisposition.

At the institutional level, trust in partnership is the central explanatory mechanism across both models, particularly in the China model where its effect is substantially stronger. Governance/ cultural norms plays a more conditional role: it is weak or negligible for Russia but becomes negative for China due to suppression effects arising from its high overlap with trust.

Overall, both models follow the same structural logic, but differ in how governance/ cultural norms is functionally expressed. The Russia model reflects a more neutral dual-institution structure, whereas the China model reflects a trust-dominant evaluative system in which governance represents residual and context-specific variance.

Chart 1 Structural Model



Note.
 ns = non-significant; † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.
 β = standardised beta coefficient

Q2 : Does personal exposure translate into country evaluation in the same way for Russia and China?

A personal exposure grouping variable was constructed to capture respondents' personal exposure to each country. Exposure is measured using three indicators:

- (i) whether the respondent has visited the country,
- (ii) whether an immediate family member has worked or studied there, and
- (iii) whether the respondent has had prior interaction with nationals from that country.

A binary variable was then created, where 1 indicates at least one form of exposure and 0 indicates no exposure. This variable is applied in the model to test whether personal experience conditions the relationship between bilateral relationship perception and overall country evaluation in both countries. Specifically, the model examines whether the strength and structure of the relationship-to-evaluation pathway differs between respondents with and without exposure.

The analysis is grounded in the expectation that individuals with exposure rely more on direct experiential knowledge, while those without exposure depend more on symbolic, media-based, or ideological indicators. As a result, exposure is expected to moderate the stability and strength of the relationship between bilateral perception and overall country evaluation. This framework allows the study to assess whether geopolitical evaluations are structurally experience-independent or experience-conditioned, introducing a socio-experiential dimension into the model of foreign country perception.

2.1 Multi-group Structural Results

Chi-square difference tests indicate clear divergence between Russia and China.

For Russia, the structural model is invariant across exposure groups ($\Delta\chi^2(11) = 12.031, p = .361$), suggesting that personal exposure does not significantly alter the structural relationships among the variables. This suggests that evaluations of Russia are consistent across individuals and are not significantly shaped by personal experience.

In contrast, the China model is not invariant ($\Delta\chi^2(11) = 28.098, p = .003$), indicating that at least one structural pathway differs significantly across exposure groups. This indicates that respondents' evaluations of China are more affected by their personal contact and experience.

2.2 Descriptive Evidence of Relational Exposure

Descriptive indicators of exposure further contextualise these structural differences. Respondents report substantially higher engagement with China than with Russia across all exposure dimensions. Only 1.8% of respondents have visited Russia compared to 22.7% for

China, while 2.5% report family ties in Russia versus 6.2% in China. Similarly, interpersonal interaction is far more common with Chinese nationals (37.3%) than Russian nationals (6.8%).

This asymmetry in exposure provides important context for the multigroup results. China is not only more frequently experienced but also more socially embedded in respondents' lived environments, whereas Russia remains a low-exposure reference point.

To further strengthen the argument that respondents perceived Russia as relying more on media-based channels, a chi-square analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between media consumption patterns and personal exposure. The results demonstrated a statistically significant association between these variables (see Table 2).

Table 2 Association Between Media Type and Personal exposure (China and Russia)

Media Type	Russia		China		Total (%)
	No exposure	Exposure	No exposure	Exposure	
Television	34.5	33.9	37.5	30.2	34.5
Internet / News Forums	9.0	17.4	7.2	13.5	9.8
Social Media Platforms	56.5	48.7	55.3	56.3	55.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note. N = 995. For Russia: $\chi^2(2) = 7.46$, $p = .024$, Cramer's V = .087. For China: $\chi^2(2) = 13.69$, $p = .001$, Cramer's V = .117.

Personal exposure (Russia) and Media Type

The association between personal exposure (Russia) and media type was examined using a chi-square test of independence. The results indicate a statistically significant relationship between personal exposure and media usage, $\chi^2(2, N = 995) = 7.459$, $p = .024$.

In terms of distribution, respondents with no exposure reported higher reliance on social media platforms (56.5%) compared to television (34.5%) and internet/news forums (9.0%). For those with exposure, social media remained the dominant source (48.7%), but the proportion using internet/news forums increased notably to 17.4%, while television use was relatively similar (33.9%).

The strength of association, as measured by Cramer's V = .087, suggests a weak relationship between personal exposure and media type. This indicates that while the association is statistically significant, the practical effect size is small.

Personal exposure (China) and Media Type

A chi-square test of independence was also conducted to assess the relationship between personal exposure (China) and media type. The results show a statistically significant association, $\chi^2(2, N = 995) = 13.692$, $p = .001$.

Examining the percentages, respondents with no exposure were more likely to use television (37.5%) compared to those with exposure (30.2%). Conversely, individuals with personal

exposure showed higher engagement with internet/news forums (13.5%) than those with no exposure (7.2%). The use of social media platforms remained consistently high across both groups (55.3% vs. 56.3%).

The effect size, indicated by Cramer’s $V = .117$, reflects a weak but slightly stronger association compared to Russia. This suggests that experiential differences captured by China have a modest influence on media preference.

Both personal exposure (Russia and China) shows statistically significant associations with media type, particularly highlighting a shift from traditional media (television) toward internet-based sources among certain experiential groups. However, the effect sizes are small, indicating that media preference is only weakly influenced by these experiential variables, with social media platforms remaining the dominant source across all groups.

The combination of structural and descriptive findings suggests two distinct modes of geopolitical cognition. For Russia, low levels of relational exposure correspond with structural stability in evaluation processes. Perceptions are formed in a relatively uniform way across individuals, regardless of personal experience. For China, higher levels of relational exposure correspond with structural heterogeneity. Personal experience meaningfully reshapes how bilateral perceptions translate into overall country evaluation, producing a more differentiated cognitive structure.

In short, China is both more relationally proximate and more cognitively sensitive to that proximity, while Russia is evaluated through a more distant but structurally consistent evaluative framework.

Table 3 presents a comparison of structural path coefficients across groups, illustrating the moderating effect of exposure on the strength and significance of relationships within the China model.

Table 3 Comparison of structural path coefficients across groups in China Model

Structural paths (standardized estimates)	No Exposure (0)	Exposure (1)	Total
Stage 1: Psychological Configuration			
Foreign Information Influence → Media resilience	-.001 (ns)	-.098*	-.038 (ns)
Media resilience → Authoritarian predisposition	.062 (ns)	.099 (+)	.084*
Stage 2: Institutional cognition			
Authoritarian predisposition → Trust in partnership	0.204***	0.089 (ns)	.162***
Authoritarian predisposition → Governance & cultural norms	0.132*	0.206**	.165***
Stage 3: Bilateral Perception			
Trust in partnership → Bilateral relationship	0.890***	0.762***	.862***
Governance & cultural norms → Bilateral relationship	-0.242*	-0.205 (ns)	-.234***
Authoritarian predisposition → Bilateral relationship	-0.046 (ns)	0.180***	.052 (+)
Stage 4: Country Performance Evaluation			

Bilateral relationship → Overall country performance	0.218***	0.185**	210***
Cross-construct association			
Trust dimensions ↔ Governance & cultural norms	0.795***	0.798***	0.790***

Note. ns = non-significant; † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Model fit for both groups was acceptable ($CFI = 0.938$, $TLI = 0.919$, $RMSEA = 0.060$, $SRMR = 0.047$), indicating that the structural model provides an adequate representation of the data across groups.

Overall, the results show a generally consistent structural pattern across exposure conditions, with some pathway-level differences between the non-exposed and exposed groups.

In Stage 1 (Psychological Configuration), foreign information influence does not significantly predict media resilience in the non-exposed group ($\beta = -.001$, ns), but shows a small significant effect under exposure ($\beta = -.098$, $p < .05$). However, the total effect is not significant ($\beta = -.038$, ns), indicating that this association is not stable across the full sample. Media resilience shows a small but statistically significant total association with authoritarian predisposition (Total $\beta = .084$, $p < .05$), although the path is weak and not consistently significant within either exposure group.

In Stage 2 (Institutional Cognition), authoritarian predisposition shows significant total effects on both trust (Total $\beta = .162$, $p < .001$) and governance and cultural norms (Total $\beta = .165$, $p < .001$). At the group level, its effect on trust is significant only in the non-exposed group ($\beta = .204$, $p < .001$) and becomes non-significant under exposure ($\beta = .089$, ns), while its effect on governance is stronger under exposure ($\beta = .206$, $p < .01$) compared to the non-exposed group ($\beta = .132$, $p < .05$).

In Stage 3 (Bilateral Relationship Perception), trust remains the strongest predictor across all specifications (non-exposed: $\beta = .890$, $p < .001$; exposed: $\beta = .762$, $p < .001$; total: $\beta = .862$, $p < .001$). Governance shows a negative and significant effect in the non-exposed group ($\beta = -.242$, $p < .05$) but is not significant under exposure ($\beta = -.205$, $p = .112$), although it remains significant in the total model ($\beta = -.234$, $p < .001$). Authoritarian predisposition is not significant in the non-exposed group ($\beta = -.046$, ns) but becomes significant under exposure ($\beta = .180$, $p < .001$), while the total effect remains small ($\beta = .052$).

In Stage 4 (Country Performance Evaluation), bilateral relationship perception consistently predicts overall country performance across all specifications (non-exposed: $\beta = .218$, $p < .001$; exposed: $\beta = .185$, $p < .01$; total: $\beta = .210$, $p < .001$).

The association between trust and governance remains high and stable across all models (non-exposed: $r = .795$; exposed: $r = .798$; total: $r = .790$), indicating consistent covariance between these constructs across conditions.

Q3 : How do democratic preference orientations⁷ influence Malaysians' perceptions and evaluations of China and Russia?

In addition to the multi-group analysis, this study examines how democratic preferences shape Malaysians' cognitive processing and evaluations of China and Russia. Separate structural models were estimated for both countries to assess whether relationships differ across democratic preference groups. The results show clear structural variation in the China model, whereas the Russia model shows only marginal evidence of non-invariance, with the chi-square difference test approaching conventional significance levels. Overall, democratic orientation appears to condition perceptions and evaluations of China more strongly than those of Russia.

Perceived foreign information influence shows a weak and inconsistent relationship with media resilience in both models. In the China model, all effects are small and not significant ($\beta = .046 / .098 / -.085$). In the Russia model, effects are similarly weak, except for a significant negative effect among authoritarian-oriented respondents ($\beta = -.232, p < .01$). This indicates that perceived foreign media influence generally does not shape media resilience, except in the Russia case where it is associated with lower resilience among authoritarian-oriented individuals.

Media resilience is positively associated with authoritarian predisposition among democratic and indifferent respondents in both countries (China: $\beta = .092 / .215, p < .05$; Russia: $\beta = .095 / .226, p < .05$), but not among authoritarian-oriented respondents.

Across both models, authoritarian predisposition is positively linked to trust and governance perceptions, but the pattern differs by context. In China, the strongest effect is concentrated among authoritarian-oriented respondents for trust ($\beta = .525, p < .001$), whereas in Russia the effects are more evenly distributed across groups ($\beta = .144-.226, p < .05$ for trust; $\beta = .136-.380, p < .01$ for governance).

Trust in partnerships is the strongest predictor of bilateral relationship perceptions in both China ($\beta = .804-1.044, p < .001$) and Russia ($\beta = .539-.751, p < .001$). In turn, bilateral relationship perceptions significantly predict country performance evaluations, with stronger and more consistent effects in China than in Russia.

Overall, the findings suggest that evaluations of China and Russia are driven more by trust and relational perceptions than by perceived foreign information influence. Authoritarian predisposition mainly operates indirectly through trust and governance-related perceptions rather than as a direct predictor of outcomes.

⁷ Indicator

Which of the following statements comes closest to your own opinion?

1- Democracy is always preferable to any other form of government / 2- For people like me, it does not matter whether we have a democratic or a non-democratic government / 3- Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one

Table 4a Standardized Structural Path Estimates Across Democratic Preference Groups in China Model

Structural paths (standardized estimates)	Democracy is always preferable	Government type does not matter	Authoritarian government sometimes preferable
Stage 1: Psychological Configuration			
Foreign information influence → Media resilience	.046	.098	-.085
Media resilience predictors → Authoritarian predisposition	.092*	.215*	-.025
Stage 2: Institutional cognition			
Authoritarian predisposition → Trust in partnership	.115*	.065	.525***
Authoritarian predisposition → Governance & cultural norms	.132*	.175	.312**
Stage 3: Bilateral Perception			
Trust dimensions → Bilateral relationship	.804***	.518	1.044***
Governance & cultural norms → Bilateral relationship	-.180*	.151	-.423†
Authoritarian predisposition → Bilateral relationship	.100**	-.030	-.128
Stage 4: Country Performance Evaluation			
Bilateral relationship → Overall country performance	.173**	.386***	.126
Governance & cultural norms → Overall country performance	-.016	-.538	-.100
Authoritarian predisposition → Overall country performance	.082*	.100	-.008
Trust dimensions → Overall country performance	.191†	.625	.481
Cross-construct association			
Trust dimensions ↔ Governance & cultural norms	.766***	.963***	.728***

Note. ns = non-significant; † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

The multi-group structural model demonstrated acceptable fit across all groups (CFI = 0.933, TLI = 0.913, RMSEA = 0.063, SRMR = 0.053), indicating that the structural model provides an adequate representation of the data across groups. The chi-square difference test indicated that constraining structural paths across groups significantly reduced model fit ($\Delta\chi^2 = 34.311$, $\Delta df = 22$, $p = .046$), suggesting partial structural non-invariance among democratic preference groups.

Table 4b Standardized Structural Path Estimates Across Democratic Preference Groups in Russia Model

Structural paths (standardized estimates)	Democracy is always preferable	Government type does not matter	Authoritarian government sometimes preferable
Stage 1: Psychological Configuration			
Foreign information influence → Media resilience	-.008 (ns)	.063 (ns)	-.232**
Media resilience predictors → Authoritarian predisposition	.095*	.226*	-.022 (ns)
Stage 2: Institutional cognition			
Authoritarian predisposition → Trust in partnership	.144**	.084 (ns)	.226*
Authoritarian predisposition → Governance & cultural norms	.136**	.243*	.380**
Stage 3: Bilateral Perception			
Trust dimensions → Bilateral relationship	.751***	.539***	.397 (ns)
Governance & cultural norms → Bilateral relationship	-.077 (ns)	.193†	.291 (ns)
Authoritarian predisposition → Bilateral relationship	.002 (ns)	.082 (ns)	.079 (ns)
Stage 4: Country Performance Evaluation			
Bilateral relationship → Overall country performance	.132**	.261*	.074 (ns)
Governance & cultural norms → Overall country performance	.261***	.069 (ns)	.580 (ns)
Authoritarian predisposition → Overall country performance	.102**	.093 (ns)	-.005 (ns)
Trust dimensions → Overall country performance	.038 (ns)	-.103 (ns)	-.271 (ns)
Cross-construct association			
Trust dimensions ↔ Governance & cultural norms	.744***	.629***	.847***

Note. ns = non-significant; † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

The multi-group structural model demonstrated acceptable fit across all groups ($CFI = 0.939$, $TLI = 0.921$, $RMSEA = 0.059$, $SRMR = 0.059$), indicating that the proposed model adequately represented the data across democratic preference groups. The chi-square difference test further indicated that constraining structural paths across groups marginally reduced model fit ($\Delta\chi^2 = 33.696$, $\Delta df = 22$, $p = .053$), suggesting potential partial structural non-invariance among democratic preference groups.

Q4 : How do Malaysian respondents differ in their geopolitical perception profiles toward Russia and China, and what factors predict membership in these profiles?

3.1 Segmentation Analysis

A segmentation analysis was conducted to identify distinct patterns of geopolitical perception among respondents. Unlike the structural equation models, which focus on relationships between variables. This segmentation aims to uncover whether respondents can be meaningfully classified into distinct geopolitical orientation profiles based on their evaluations of Russia and China.

3.2 Profile Characterisation based on Indicator Distribution

To further interpret the substantive meaning of the profiles, the standardised mean scores of all the evaluation indicators were examined across groups. The results reveal a highly systematic and internally consistent structure across the three profiles.

The China-favourable profile is characterised by consistently negative scores across all indicators, indicating below-average evaluations of Russia and relatively more favourable orientations toward China when compared to other respondents. This pattern is particularly pronounced in trust-related dimensions, where economic, security, and educational trust show the strongest negative deviations. In contrast, the Russia-favourable profile shows consistently positive scores across all indicators, reflecting strong positive evaluations of Russia across performance, trust, governance legitimacy, and cultural perception dimensions. China is evaluated comparatively less favourably within this group. The mixed profile clusters around the sample mean, with near-zero deviations across all indicators, indicating a more balanced and less ideologically polarised evaluative structure. The profiling results show that the majority of respondents fall into the Mixed category (71.0%), followed by the China-positive profile (19.8%) and the Russia-positive profile (9.2%).

Table 4 Standardised mean scores of geopolitical evaluation indicators across profiles

Indicator	China-favourable	Mixed	Russia-favourable
Overall country performance	-0.72	0.07	1.02
Bilateral direction	-0.94	0.12	1.12
Economic trust	-1.07	0.15	1.20
Security trust	-1.20	0.14	1.52
Educational trust	-1.15	0.14	1.40
Governance legitimacy	-0.78	0.05	1.27
Cultural/religious tolerance	-0.86	0.06	1.36
Percentage (%)	19.8%	71.0%	9.2%

Then, a multinomial logistic regression was conducted to examine the factors associated with respondents' alignment with three profiles: Russia (+), China (+), and Mixed (as the reference category). The model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(34) = 223.067$, $p < .001$, indicating that the predictors collectively distinguish between the profile membership. The goodness-of-fit tests indicated an adequate model fit, with a non-significant Pearson chi-square ($p = .412$), suggesting no evidence of model misfit. The model explained between 20.3% (Cox and Snell R^2) and 25.5% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in classification, indicating moderate explanatory power.

Overall classification accuracy was 71.1%, with a strong ability to correctly classify the Mixed category (94.2%). However, the model performed poorly in distinguishing the Russia (+) and China (+) profiles, correctly classifying 0% and 24.2% of cases respectively. This suggests that while the model effectively identifies respondents with mixed orientations, it is less effective in discriminating between the two distinct profiles.

Table 5 Multinomial Logistic Regression Predictors of Profile Membership

Russia (+) vs Mixed

Predictor	B	SE	p	OR
Past democracy	0.123	0.061	.042*	1.131
Live narrative	-0.075	0.203	.713	0.928
Resilience predictors	0.238	0.174	.172	1.269
Ethnicity (Malays)	1.388	0.744	.062 (+)	4.008
Gender (Male)	0.410	0.239	.086 (+)	1.507

*Note. ns = non-significant; † p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.*

China (+) vs Mixed

Predictor	B	SE	p	OR
Future democracy	-0.114	0.058	.047*	0.892
Live narrative	0.440	0.167	.008**	1.553
Resilience predictors	-0.054	0.127	.670	0.947
Ethnicity (Chinese)	1.185	0.389	.002	3.272
Gender (Male)	-0.589	0.179	.001	0.555

*Note. ns = non-significant; † p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.*

1. Russia (+) vs Mixed profile

The results indicate that **only one democracy-related variable is statistically significant** in distinguishing the Russia (+) profile from the Mixed category. **The question on past democracy perception is a significant predictor** ($B = 0.123$, $p = .042$), suggesting that **respondents who perceive Malaysia's past democratic condition more positively are slightly more likely to align with the Russia (+) narrative profile (OR = 1.131)**. However, the effect is modest in other predictors show limited explanatory power:

- **Live narrative exposure** ($p = .713$) and **resilience predictors** ($p = .172$) are not statistically significant, indicating no clear association with Russia (+) alignment.
- **Ethnicity (Malays)** is marginally significant ($p = .062$), suggesting a possible but weak association with this group.
- **Gender (Male)** is also marginal ($p = .086$), indicating a weak tendency for males to be more likely associated with Russia (+), but not at conventional significance levels.

2. China (+) vs Mixed profile

The China (+) profile shows a clearer and more structurally defined pattern of predictors.

- **Live narrative exposure** is a strong and significant predictor ($B = 0.440$, $p = .008$, $OR = 1.553$), indicating that respondents exposed to stronger narrative signals are significantly more likely to align with the China (+) profile.
- **Resilience predictor** ($p = .670$) is not statistically significant, indicating no clear association with China (+) alignment.
- **Ethnicity (Chinese)** is also a strong predictor ($p = .002$, $OR = 3.272$), suggesting that Chinese respondents are substantially more likely to identify with the China (+) narrative orientation.
- **Gender (Male)** is a significant negative predictor ($B = -0.589$, $p = .001$, $OR = 0.555$), indicating that males are less likely than females to align with the China (+) profile.
- **Future democracy preference** is a weak but statistically significant predictor ($p = .047$), suggesting **that more democratic future-oriented preferences are associated with a slightly lower likelihood of China (+) alignment (OR = 0.892).**

Across both comparisons, a clear asymmetry emerges. The China (+) profile is more structurally defined, with stronger and more consistent predictors—particularly narrative exposure, ethnicity, and gender. In contrast, the Russia (+) profile is weakly differentiated, with only one significant predictor and the rest showing marginal or non-significant effects.

Survey items used to analyze drivers of perception towards China and Russia

Construct	Survey Question
Foreign Information Influence	<p>Q : Russia engages in online propaganda targeting Malaysia</p> <p>Q: China Intervenes in Malaysian media reporting</p>
Media Resilience	<p>Q: I regularly check multiple sources before believing international news</p> <p>Q: I often compare Malaysian news with trusted foreign media</p> <p>Q: I am confident in my ability to distinguish factual reporting from propaganda.</p>
Authoritarian predisposition	<p>Q: In order to solve the country's urgent problems, a leader can govern the country by decrees and disregard the parliament if necessary</p> <p>Q: As long as a government can solve our country's economic problem, it does not matter if the government holds regular elections or not</p> <p>Q: This country needs a leader who can break the rules if necessary to get things done.</p> <p>Q: As long as the government can maintain order and stability in the country, it does not matter whether it is democratic or undemocratic</p>
Trust dimension	<p><u>China</u></p> <p>Q: Economic partner for Malaysia</p> <p>Q: Security and defence partner for Malaysia</p> <p>Q: Educational partner for Malaysia</p> <p><u>Russia</u></p> <p>Q : Economic partner for Malaysia</p> <p>Q: Security and defence partner for Malaysia</p> <p>Q: Educational partner for Malaysia</p>
Governance and cultural norms	<p><u>China</u></p> <p>Q: Do you agree or disagree that China... Provides useful alternatives to democratic system in terms of values and governance</p> <p>Q: Do you agree or disagree that China... Government is tolerant in treatment towards Muslim Uyghur minority and its cultural and religious identities in Xinjiang?</p> <p><u>Russia</u></p> <p>Q: Do you agree or disagree that Russia... Provides useful alternatives to democratic system in terms of values and governance</p> <p>Q: Do you agree or disagree that Russia... Government is tolerant in treatment towards Muslim minority and its cultural and religious identities in Chechnya?</p> <p><u>Interaction</u></p> <p>Q: Have you visited any of these countries?</p> <p>a) Russia</p> <p>b) China</p>

	<p>Q: Is your immediate family member working or studying in...</p> <p>a) Russia</p> <p>b) China</p> <p>Q: Have you had any interaction with.....in the past? [Russian Nationals]</p> <p>Q: Have you had any interaction with.....in the past? [Chinese Nationals]</p>
Bilateral relationship	<p><u>China</u></p> <p>Q: In your view, do you think Malaysia's relationship with China is heading in the right or wrong direction?</p> <p><u>Russia</u></p> <p>Q: In your view, do you think Malaysia's relationship with Russia is heading in the right or wrong direction?</p>
Overall performance	<p>Now I am going to read you the names of a few countries/regional actors. Thinking about each country/regional actor, please rate how you feel about its overall performance compared to other countries based on a score between 1 to 5, where 1 is "Very poor" and 5 is 'very good'.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China • Russia

Construct for Multinomial Logistic Regression Predictors of Profile Membership

Construct	Survey Question
Democracy	<p>Q: In your opinion, how democratic is Malaysia?</p> <p>Q: Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Malaysia?</p> <p>Q: Where would you place our country under the present government?</p> <p>Q: Where would you place our country ten (10) years ago?</p> <p>Q: Where would you want our country to be ten (10) years from now?</p> <p>Q: If "1" means that democracy is completely unsuitable for Malaysia today and "10" means that it is completely suitable.</p>
Live narrative	<p>Q: How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements : The west exaggerates human rights abuse in Xinjiang for political reasons</p> <p>Q: China's aid and investment come with no political reasons</p> <p>Q: Western media unfairly demonizes Russia/China</p>
Resilience predictor	<p>Q: How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements.... I regularly check multiple sources before believing international news.</p> <p>Q: How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements.... I often compare Malaysian news with trusted foreign media.</p> <p>Q: How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements.... I am confident in my ability to distinguish factual reporting from propaganda.</p>

Construct for Segmentation Analysis

Segmentation Item	Survey Question
Democracy	<p>Q: In your opinion, how democratic is Malaysia?</p> <p>Q: Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Malaysia?</p> <p>Q: Where would you place our country under the present government?</p> <p>Q: Where would you place our country ten (10) years ago?</p> <p>Q: Where would you want our country to be ten (10) years from now?</p> <p>Q: If “1” means that democracy is completely unsuitable for Malaysia today and “10” means that it is completely suitable.</p>
Live narrative	<p>Q: The west exaggerates human rights abuse in Xinjiang for political reasons</p> <p>Q: China’s aid and investment come with no political reasons</p> <p>Q: Western media unfairly demonizes Russia/China</p>
Resilience predictor	<p>Q: I regularly check multiple sources before believing international news.</p> <p>Q: I often compare Malaysian news with trusted foreign media.</p> <p>Q: I am confident in my ability to distinguish factual reporting from propaganda.</p>

APPENDIX 5

Survey Items Used to Measure State of Democracy in Malaysia

Category	Survey Question
Satisfaction with Democracy in Malaysia	Q: Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Malaysia?
Democracy: Present Government	Q: 1 means completely undemocratic and 10 means completely democratic. Where would you place our country under the present government?
Democracy: Past 10 Years	Q: 1 means completely undemocratic and 10 means completely democratic. Where would you place our country ten (10) years ago?
Democracy: 10 Years Ahead	Q: 1 means completely undemocratic and 10 means completely democratic. Where would you want our country to be ten (10) years from now?
Democracy: Suits Malaysia	Q: Here is a similar scale of 1 to 10 measuring the extent to which people think democracy is suitable for our country. If "1" means that democracy is completely unsuitable for Malaysia today and "10" means that it is completely suitable, where would you place it?
Democracy of Countries	Q: Here is a scale: 1 means completely undemocratic and 10 means completely democratic. Where would you place each country today on this scale?
Democracy as the Best System	Q: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Democracy may have its problems, but it is still the best form of government."
Rule-Breaking Leadership	Q: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: This country needs a leader who can break the rules if necessary to get things done?
Governing by Decree	Q: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: In order to solve the country's urgent problems, a leader can govern the country by decrees and disregard the parliament if necessary?
Stability over Democracy	Q: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: As long as the government can maintain order and stability in the country, it does not matter whether it is democratic or undemocratic?
Economy over Election	Q: As long as a government can solve our country's economic problem, it does not matter if the government holds regular elections or not

APPENDIX 6

Survey Items and Dimensions for Assessing Resilience

Category	Survey Question
Information Exposure	<p>Q: Which social media platform do you usually use?</p> <p>Q: On average, how many hours do you spend on social media per day?</p>
Information Ecosystem	<p>Q: Please tell me TWO (2) sources/channels you consider to be your main source of information for local news</p> <p>Q: Please tell me THREE (3) sources/channels you consider to be your main source of information for international news</p>
Information Ecosystem	<p>Q: Which sources are most likely to spread fake or inaccurate news?</p> <p>Q: Who should be responsible for ensuring accurate news?</p>
Verification Behaviour	<p>Q: When you forward the news or information that you receive, will you verify before sharing?</p> <p>Q: (If yes) How do you verify the news or information that you forwarded?</p>
Verification Depth & Critical Evaluation	<p>Q: Do you only share news after reading and verifying, or based on headlines?</p> <p>Q: Do you check multiple sources before believing international news?</p> <p>Q: How confident are you in identifying propaganda vs factual reporting?</p> <p>Q: Do you compare Malaysian news with foreign media?</p>