

China, Xi Jinping messaging out of step with experience of diaspora

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<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8322826/chinese-migrants-get-hit-below-the-belt-overseas/>

Trade and [investment ties](#) between the People's Republic of China and other countries, particularly Chinese foreign investment through the Belt and Road Initiative, are often seen as a cornerstone of its expanding global influence. However, in countries such as Indonesia, it has also contributed to anti-PRC and anti-Chinese sentiments.

State-controlled media in the PRC has chosen to [downplay these anti-Chinese sentiments in Indonesia](#), in order to avoid whipping up nationalism that may derail the bilateral relationship. This is in stark contrast of its public condemnation of anti-Chinese racism in the United States or its use of nationalism against Japan.

Anti-Chinese discrimination already took place in Indonesia before the establishment of the PRC.

Since then, mass violence against Chinese-Indonesians has flared up occasionally. During the Cold War anti-Chinese discrimination and anti-Communist sentiments merged in Indonesia.

The suspicions of loyalty and racism towards Chinese-Indonesians still simmers to this day. In 2016, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, then also known by his Hakka Chinese name Ahok, became a target of vicious anti-Chinese racism as a candidate in the Jakarta gubernatorial election. According to a 2022 survey by the ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, more than 40 per cent of Indonesians think that Chinese descendants are loyal to the PRC.

Yet, reactions within the PRC to these developments were relatively muted. Since the 1990s, the PRC has largely refrained from commenting on anti-Chinese racism in Indonesia, including during the 1998 anti-Chinese riots.

This is because developing better relations with countries such as Indonesia is more important to the PRC government than supporting the Chinese diaspora. Moreover, Indonesia has always regarded PRC statements about the protection of Chinese Indonesians as interference in its domestic politics.

The PRC government is thus selective about when to choose to highlight the interests of the Chinese diaspora. And despite becoming more powerful in the last two decades, Beijing has not changed this approach.

However, despite the PRC government's refrain, suspicions towards the PRC and the Chinese people have continued in Indonesia. Indeed, the expanding trade and investment links have exacerbated, rather than ameliorated this.

The Belt and Road Initiative has brought about closer ties between the PRC and Indonesian governments and between the two leaders, Xi Jinping and Joko Widodo. But popular opinion in Indonesia has gone the other way.

A 2021 Lowy Institute poll found that less than half of Indonesians think the PRC's economic growth has been good for Indonesia. The ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute survey also showed that more than 40 per cent of Indonesians are worried about the Belt and Road.

Criticism of PRC's investment in Indonesia centres on the use of PRC migrant workers. This resentment towards PRC workers is conflated with the general distrust of Chinese-Indonesians. This was politically exploited during the 2019 Indonesian presidential election, with disinformation circulating claiming that Indonesia was facing an influx of millions of Chinese workers.

The public response in the PRC was once again muted, with state media refraining from commenting or reporting on anti-PRC or anti-Chinese sentiment during the Indonesian election.

There are two reasons for this. First, this is a deliberate strategy by the PRC government to prevent an outpouring of nationalism from derailing the thus far positive and steadily improving bilateral relationship. The government tampers nationalism to suit its interests.

For example, it has often whipped up nationalism against Japan. Yet it has also tried to calm down the population by appealing to "rational nationalism" when the nationalistic mood had gone further than it preferred.

Second, downplaying anti-Chinese sentiment makes the PRC's foreign policy appear more effective to the domestic audience. The domestic messaging is that people around the world, especially those in developing countries, appreciate PRC investment, and view PRC more favourably because of it.

This is one of the ways the government justifies investment overseas rather than more spending domestically. Shining a light on anti-Chinese and anti-Belt and Road sentiment in Indonesia would contradict this domestic messaging.

The PRC government often publicly criticises Western countries including Australia and United States for anti-Chinese racism. At the same time, it has ignored, at least in public, anti-Chinese policies and incidents in some other countries. This has led to scepticism among some Chinese diaspora when the PRC claims to speak for them or protect their interests.

The narrative that the PRC would always protect the interests of Chinese diaspora may be more successful domestically than internationally.

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