



January 26, 2024

“Disinformation in the Indo-Pacific” Research Project for the Risks in Information Sphere Implementation Report

On January 22, 2024, the Research Project for the Risks in Information Sphere at Nakasone Peace Institute (NPI) held a discussion based on reports from Dr. Nagasako Tomoko, Researcher at the Office of Cyber Domain Awareness, Information-technology Promotion Agency, Japan (IPA); and Suzuki Ryohei, Doctoral student from the Graduate School of Law and International Relations, Hitotsubashi University. The summary of their reports is as follows.

Dr. Nagasako presented a report entitled “Analysis of the Disinformation Situation in the Indo-Pacific Region,” on the results of a survey and analysis of the disinformation situation and countermeasures against it in the Indo-Pacific region based on the report she prepared as a member of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation Security Studies Program “The Study Group of Disinformation in the Indo-Pacific Region” from FY2021 to FY2022.

During the 2019 general election in Australia, as in the previous U.S. presidential election in 2016, cyberattacks on political parties and parliament occurred prior to the election; China’s involvement was suspected. In response, Australia took extensive steps including conducting investigations into the conduct of elections and related threats, assessing the impact of fake news proliferation on journalism, and establishing the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce, as well as legislating The National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Act 2018 and conducting a media literacy campaign.

In the Philippines, until around 2022, disinformation from domestic origins targeting the presidential election for the purpose of maintaining the system and gaining authority within the country was predominant. However, since around 2023, influence operations by Chinese state-affiliated media are increasing. In the Philippines, in response to disinformation, in addition to the “Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012,” a new “Act Criminalizing the Creation and Dissemination of Fake News” was proposed in August 2022. Although the Act clearly stipulates severe penalties on violators, there is ambiguity in its definition, such as the inclusion of misinformation and disinformation in the term “fake news,” as well as issues regarding the specific criteria for application and the scope of penalties.

Disinformation in India is strongly associated with Hindu nationalism and tends to be used for domestic political campaigns. There are risks threatening social harmony by inciting binary oppositions such as rural/urban and elite/non-elite. The use of disinformation in elections and other democratic processes can lead to political instability. In addition, disinformation in India, which has been confirmed in recent years, is creating anti-scientific and anti-medical messages about the

COVID-19 pandemic, as well as anti-Islamic narratives, such as Muslims spreading the virus. In India, under the existing Penal Code and Information Technology Act, the government can issue removal orders for social media posts that it deems fake or misleading. In addition to this countermeasure, newly revised Penal Code Bills, which would allow for severe penalties for those who create and/or publish false or misleading information, have been submitted for consideration in August 2023. As many as 15 fact-checking organizations accredited by the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN) are actively involved, although some of them have been called into question regarding their independence from the government.

Propaganda, including government disinformation, has become a problem in Indonesia, and this is aimed at manipulating information, dividing the population, and distracting the public from domestic politics. The country has launched a government information literacy program since 2018, which focuses on how to be an obedient citizen to the government, with, as an example, “do not spread falsehoods and think carefully when criticizing the government.” It can be said to be a learning program that risks reinforcing the state’s control of speech against the people.

While disinformation about private topics such as health-related, specific products, services and scams, and consumer-related topics are the most frequently identified disinformation in Thailand, in recent years there have been revelations of government manipulation of information through disinformation. Disinformation from China has been on the rise. In addition to the spread of disinformation through Chinese bot accounts and other means, in the past few years, Chinese media in cooperation with Thai media have been reporting more and more in favor of China, creating a narrative that is favorable to the Chinese side, even if it is not a direct disinformation operation. Thailand has a “Computer Crime Act” that clearly stipulates the regulation of false data. The law’s provisions regarding false data regulation are ambiguous in their scope of application and can be used to criticize the establishment, etc. The number of suspects under the provisions jumped ninefold between 2020 and 2021, when there were large-scale anti-establishment demonstrations, and the operational situation is serious.

The above overview of the disinformation situation in the Indo-Pacific region shows that while China’s involvement in terms of foreign influence operations requires caution, there is a tendency for disinformation to be used to defend authoritarian and socialist regimes and to strengthen domestic regimes. It has been also confirmed that in the name of disinformation countermeasures, governments are controlling public discourse, and some governments themselves are using disinformation to induce and control public opinion. It is necessary to note that disinformation countermeasures in these regions differ from those taken in the West, which are aimed at defending democracy. This point should serve as a valuable lesson in promoting disinformation countermeasures in Japan.

Next, Mr. Suzuki presented a report entitled “Trends in Case Mapping and Noteworthy Recent Cases in the Sasakawa Peace Foundation Disinformation Portal Site,” based on cases to be posted on the Sasakawa Peace Foundation website (the website “Indo-Pacific Disinformation Portal” (“インド太平洋地域の偽情報ポータル” in Japanese) is maintained only in Japanese), which included

examples of disinformation related to the 2024 presidential election in Taiwan. Among the disinformation cases collected in the projects conducted by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, the following trends were noted regarding the cases related to the 2024 Taiwan presidential election.

First, a technical trend observed in disinformation was that more cases than ever were spread through the social networking service (SNS) social media TikTok. Examples include the “allegations about illegal buildings” concerning Lai Ching-te, who was recently elected president of Taiwan for the first time in the January 13, 2024 presidential election, and the disinformation that “a popular Taiwanese singer released a song ridiculing the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).” Among the disinformation cases, several deep-fake videos created using artificial intelligence were also identified. According to the Taiwan FactCheck Center, in one video uploaded to YouTube, Lai stated that he “supports cooperation between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP)” and that “both candidates do represent the mainstream view of Taiwanese people,” when in fact he said exactly the opposite. According to experts’ analysis of the video, the voice resembling Lai’s was altered by artificial intelligence.

Second, the trend found in the narratives identified a high incidence of disinformation related to U.S. skepticism. For example, war-related disinformation included the following: a military exercise called the Han Kuang drills, which were conducted as a rehearsal for former President Tsai Ing-wen’s escape and as an evacuation drill for Americans; the U.S. would not be able to protect Taiwan in the event of war and might even abandon it; and the U.S. government had asked Taiwan’s National Defense Medical Center to develop biological weapons. In addition, disinformation was spread in connection with social problems in Taiwan, such as the falsification of U.S. pork as domestic pork, and that U.S. pork contains ractopamine, an animal breeding additive that exceeds the standard value.

A detailed analysis of the disinformation surrounding Taiwan’s presidential election in 2024 can provide insights into the disinformation spread by TikTok in Japan, countermeasures against the spread of deep-fake videos, and preparation for U.S. skepticism aimed at alienating both Japan and the United States.

According to the Taiwan Information Operations Research Group (IORG), U.S. skepticism can be divided into the following eight categories. Namely, they were 1) Abandonment: The United States treats Taiwan as a chess piece and will abandon Taiwan; 2) Weakness: The United States is weak and unable to protect Taiwan; 3) Chaos: The United States is the source of chaos and war in the world; 4) Fake Friend: The United States claims to but does not support, coerces and benefits from Taiwan; 5) Collusion: The United States colludes with Taiwanese elites and exploits Taiwanese people; 6) Not democracy: The United States is internally corrupt and anti-democratic; 7) Anti-World: The United States takes actions opposed by countries around the world and its own people; 8) Destruction: The United States is making Taiwan a battlefield and will destroy Taiwan.

The following disinformation and manipulation of impressions have already been confirmed in Japan. For example, disinformation included that the wildfires in Maui were caused by a “weather weapon” attack test conducted by the U.S. military; the West is responsible for the Russia-Ukraine

War; and the U.S. military bases concentrated in Okinawa do not contribute to peace and stability in East Asia. It is pointed out that disinformation related to U.S. skepticism may increase in Japan in the future, in line with the international and domestic situation.

In the Q&A session, there were the following questions and comments: “How do you analyze disinformation in videos?”; “Information that discredits the U.S. may increase in the future”; “If you can determine that there has been disinformation intervention from other countries, how do you distinguish whether it was initiated by organizations and institutions or by individuals? In particular, how should we determine and control interventions and approach to individual politicians?”; “Since several actors on China’s side are involved, including the Party’s United Front Work Department and the People’s Liberation Army, it is necessary to categorize which actors are involved and what methods are used in the case study analysis”; “It is necessary to look at the strategic goals that the actors are trying to achieve by spreading disinformation as well as categorizing the attack methods”; “Japan is expected to look into the issues that each country is facing as well as to pursue countermeasures.”