

Securitizing Academic Mobility: Chinese Students, National Interest, and Geopolitics in the Philippines

Rosalyn Eder

National interest discourse securitizes academic mobility by transforming international students into geopolitical proxies. By analyzing the Philippine debate over Chinese students near US–Philippine military sites, this article demonstrates how securitization rhetoric legitimizes state surveillance regimes, producing the very threats it claims to address.

International higher education is not apolitical but is shaped by foreign relations and domestic interests. In the past, national interests and national security were rarely invoked in internationalization policies. However, in recent years, governments have responded to mounting geopolitical tensions and domestic pressures by reframing internationalization in terms of concerns about research security and national sovereignty. Yet the invocation of national interest often obscures the domestic political dynamics that shape how internationalization actually operates.

National Interest as Rhetorical Construction

The term “national interest” is contested. It implies consensus on what a nation’s interests are. National interest is not a pre-given reality but a social construct produced through discursive processes that link events, identities, and perceived threats into coherent narratives. For this article, national interest is understood as a [constitutive rhetorical device](#) that gains power not from describing objective conditions but from its capacity to frame certain situations as threats requiring collective response. In the Philippine case examined here, national interest discourse transforms a small number of international students into symbols of geopolitical threat.

Higher Education, Private Markets, and Constitutional Nationalism

In the Philippines, official higher education policy invokes the national interest as its guiding principle, including the national strategy for the internationalization of higher education. It is often invoked in policy making alongside its core, similarly contested dimensions: national sovereignty and national security. The Philippine Constitution codifies the national interests. In education, it limits the proportion of foreign students in any educational program to no more than one-third of total enrollment, vests control and ownership of educational institutions in Filipino citizens, and generally restricts the

practice of all professions to Filipinos. The Philippines is the only ASEAN country where such restrictions on foreign participation in education are [embedded in the Constitution](#) rather than in ordinary legislation. These restrictions, permanent fixtures since 1935 reflecting the nation’s effort to reverse colonial legacies, significantly impact incoming academic mobility. In the late 1970s, following the political unrest of the First Quarter Storm (1970) and subsequent incidents involving Iranian students who were deported for activities deemed “inimical to national interests” (1980–1981), the Philippine government established a multiagency surveillance apparatus for the administration and monitoring of international students. This infrastructure—spanning six agencies from the Commission on Higher Education to the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency—constitutes a [surveillance regime](#) that defines who counts as a bona fide international student, placing the burden of proof on incoming students and limiting their studying and employment opportunities without regard for their pastoral needs.

Securitizing Chinese Students

In the Philippines, international higher education is a politically contested space, despite international students comprising less than 1 percent of its total student population. As of 2022, the Philippines hosted approximately 22,000 international students out of a total enrollment of nearly 3.8 million—roughly 0.6 percent. In 2024, a Philippine congressman claimed that at least 4,600 Chinese students were enrolled at a single private university in Cagayan province. The Bureau of Immigration later confirmed that 1,516 student visas had been issued to Chinese nationals in Cagayan in 2023, with only approximately 400 students physically present; the university reported 486 total foreign students. Although factually incorrect, the claims sparked a heated debate over the authenticity of the Chinese students, as lawmakers questioned the seriousness of their purpose. Policymakers urged the House of Representatives and the Senate to investigate the implications of student visa policy and corruption in the Bureau of Immigration for public safety

and national security. The language used in the policy discourse, such as “sudden spike,” “alarming,” “highly suspicious,” “us” versus “them,” the addressee of the resolutions (Congress Committee on Justice and the Senate Committee on National Defense), and frequent references to major criminal activities involving some Chinese nationals reflect serious concerns about threats to national security and national sovereignty. More importantly, this language expresses fear, distrust, and suspicion not about the students themselves but about what they embody—namely the Chinese government. This pattern, in which a small number of international students are discursively transformed into proxies for a foreign government, echoes the securitization of Chinese students in Australia, the US, and other countries where geopolitical tensions have reshaped the framing of academic mobility.

The Geopolitics of Proximity

Situated in the northeastern Philippines, Cagayan Valley has two of the four new Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites designated in 2023. Originally signed in 2014, the EDCA with the US was expanded under the Marcos administration in 2023 with four additional sites, bringing the total to nine. The agreement facilitates large-scale joint military exercises and provides the US access to Philippine military bases across the archipelago. Six of these bases are located near areas of [maritime territorial dispute in Southeast Asia](#). In August 2023, China’s Ministry of Natural Resources released a revised nine-dash line map called the 10-dash line map. A new dash was added to claim Taiwan and further assert China’s exclusive sovereignty over almost the entirety of the South China Sea and the West Philippine Sea. Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam rejected these claims. On the domestic front, public sentiment toward China’s encroachment intensified amid escalating maritime conflicts between the Philippines and China. By March 2024, 76 percent of Filipinos identified China as the greatest threat to the Philippines. The concentration of Chinese students in a province hosting new EDCA sites—

during a period when the Philippines and China were engaged in near-daily maritime confrontations—was sufficient to provoke intense political and media reaction. The issue became front-page national news, prompting investigations by at least five senators, the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the National Security Council, and the Philippine National Police.

Academic Mobility and the Production of Threat

At the height of the debates, policymakers questioned whether the Philippines was prepared to confront the risks of the internationalization of higher education. The responses to perceived security threats posed by the “influx” of Chinese students in a region critical to national defense marked the country’s shifts in foreign policy, from pro-China under the previous Duterte administration to a renewed alliance with the US and Japan under the current president, Marcos, Jr. Although the policy discourse on Chinese students prompted an examination of potential corruption in international student recruitment, the framing of the issues deflected attention from inefficient migration processes and data collection to national security threats. In this context, international Chinese students became scapegoats for domestic anxieties vis-à-vis China, as they became proxies of the Chinese government. This discourse further legitimizes the country’s surveillance regime and its cautious stance toward incoming foreign students.

The Philippine case study illustrates the complex relationship between the internationalization of higher education and the geopolitical environment in which it operates as well as the tensions between academic mobility, foreign policy, and national interests. It demonstrates how the discourse of national interest operates as a constitutive force, not merely reflecting but actively producing the security threats it purports to address, with real consequences for international students who become unwitting symbols of geopolitical conflict.

Rosalyn Eder is head of international relations at Paracelsus Medical University and a lecturer in education and migration in Austria. Email: rosalyn.eder@pmu.ac.at