# ‘Beware of traps and snares’

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Never doubt the ability—nay, audacity—of the Chinese government to twist the facts to suit its ends, even when its chosen narrative flies in the face of those same facts.

In a stunning act of projection, China’s embassy in Manila has released an advisory warning Chinese citizens of “harassment” and an “unstable” security situation in the country while advising them to minimize outings, stay away from crowds, and “remain vigilant against potential security traps and schemes.”

It urged Chinese citizens already in or are about to travel to the Philippines to “keep a close watch on [the] local security situation and step up safety awareness and emergency preparedness.”

“While complying with local laws and regulations, also remain vigilant against potential security traps and schemes,” according to the official English version of the embassy statement in Mandarin. But a Google translation of the original text painted a more vivid picture: “Beware of falling into security traps and snares.”

No sooner had the embassy released its statement when Chinese news agencies began reporting the arrest of three Filipinos suspected of “spying” on China, and the dismantling of a supposed intelligence network they had set up there. How generous of our powerful neighbor to overestimate the skills and means of the Philippines to establish such a network of agents in another country—the same country whose citizens Manila has accused of surveilling its vital installations.

## Mental gymnastics

Talk about turning the tables on one’s enemy.

And what a remarkable feat of mental gymnastics for China to now depict its nationals as victims of harassment in the Philippines, when practically the only ones facing legal trouble are those caught in crackdowns on espionage, trafficking and other crimes, all major issues to which Beijing has conveniently turned a blind eye.

Malacañang was quick to refute China’s statement, noting that foreigners had nothing to fear from the authorities unless they broke the law. “We can assure China that we are not targeting any particular nationality or particular nationals … Everyone is welcome here, except of course those who are committing crimes,” Palace press officer Claire Castro said last week.

Let’s break down the facts.

In January, at least five Chinese nationals were arrested in the Philippines on suspicion of espionage, and another two were apprehended the next month. Beijing insists the allegations were fabricated. Against this backdrop are the government’s efforts to shut down remnants of Philippine offshore gaming operators, which have long been associated with cyber fraud, money laundering, and human trafficking—operations that happen to be dominated by visitors from the Chinese mainland.

## Broader strategy

In a nutshell, what Beijing calls harassment is Manila exercising the most basic function of a sovereign state: enforcing its laws.

And yet China’s embassy wants its people to believe they are under siege in the Philippines, a claim that would be comical if it weren’t so absurd, considering how Chinese coast guard ships harass Filipino fisherfolk in the West Philippine Sea every day, how Beijing aggressively militarizes contested waters, and how its cyber operations target Philippine institutions.

Of course, China, like any other state, is free to issue warnings to its citizens. But it’s a different story when it ignores the facts to dictate the narrative, using its latest travel advisory as a tool in its broader strategy of undermining the Philippines’ credibility on the world stage.

Never mind that Chinese, tourists or otherwise, continue to arrive in the Philippines in droves, with the number of travelers from China growing by 20 percent last year, according to the latest data from the Bureau of Immigration. Chinese arrivals stood at more than 500,000 in 2024, an increase from around 420,000 in the previous year.

## Criminal enterprises

If China is truly concerned about its people’s safety, it should perhaps start by recalling and repatriating those Chinese citizens who are wreaking havoc across the world for a taste of good-old “reeducation” back home. More importantly, a little self-reflection will help China determine why so many of its nationals are caught up in criminal enterprises overseas, rather than deflecting blame onto host countries that are trying to clean up the mess they leave behind.

In the meantime, the Philippines will do well to recognize China’s tactics as attempts at controlling the narrative, rather than genuine concerns about security, and respond to them as such and in kind.

If anything, Beijing’s travel advisory and the arrest of alleged Filipino spies reveal just how adept it is at distorting facts and shaping narratives to serve its own agenda. As plain as day, it’s the Philippines, and Filipinos, who must steer clear of China’s “traps and snares,” not the other way around.