

## CHINA COOPERATES WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA TO TACKLE SCAM CENTERS

by  
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“No More Bets” (孤注一掷) is a Chinese movie released on August 8, 2023 and has to date earned USD540.5 million at the box office. The movie portrays the adventure of a Chinese programmer and a Chinese model lured overseas by the prospect of a high-paying job and trafficked into a fraudulent online call scheme in a fictional Southeast Asian country. Their actions resulted in another Chinese citizen’s suicide after he became addicted to online gambling and lost all his savings. The movie aims to raise awareness of both human trafficking schemes and the dangers of gambling with the slogan “One more viewer, one less fraud victim.”

In August 2023, the release of the movie “No More Bets” sparked concerns over labor trafficking in Southeast Asia among Chinese citizens. Based on real events, the movie reflects an [emerging regional reality](#) post pandemic: the proliferation of scam centers and their new criminal modus operandi (MO). The scam centers’ operations represent a double-edged threat to two types of victims: the human trafficking victim who is coerced into forced labor by means of fake job advertisements and the online fraud victim. While the latter has been the subject of widespread [anti-fraud warnings and dissuasion efforts](#) by the Chinese Ministry of Public Safety, the former was yet largely unknown to the broader public. The film “No More Bets” thus not only exposed the horrific criminal activities of such scam centers but also illuminated the underlying driving forces, including economic precarity in China.

Since the release of the movie, Chinese authorities have ramped up their involvement and put pressure on some Southeast Asian states to crack down on scam center activities. Amid growing unease at the proliferation of scam centers in Southeast Asia and

its subsequent impact on human trafficking across the broader Asia-Pacific, this could be an opportunity for China to foster meaningful cooperation with regional states and non-state actors to generate a more positive view of China as a responsible great power.

### Impact on Southeast Asia’s Tourism Industry

Many Chinese netizens have posted anecdotes on social media platforms, such as Douyin and Weibo, about relatives falling for scam centers’ phony employment advertisements and the ensuing hardships. In combination with the movie, these stories have engendered greater public awareness concerning the danger of being abducted and trafficked into scam centers while on vacation in Southeast Asia. According to a [survey](#) conducted by 三联生活周刊 (life week) on Weibo, out of 595 000 participants, 64 percent stated that they did not want to travel to Southeast Asia owing to safety concerns, while 29 percent said they were not interested/haven’t considered traveling there.

Following the movie’s release, several Southeast Asian countries took steps to mitigate the movie’s detrimental impact on tourism. Thailand, which saw barely half of the predicted amount of post-pandemic Chinese tourists, established a 30-day free visa policy for Chinese travelers in September. [Cambodia](#) decided to outright ban the film for damaging the country’s international reputation, while [Myanmar](#) refused to screen the film in cinemas. Cambodian government entities were particularly [quick to react](#) and expressed concerns about the movie’s potential impacts on the tourism industry. Some also asked the Chinese government to clarify to the public the incentives in place to assure tourist safety, as well as the current crackdown activities. Nevertheless, merely reassuring tourists has its limitations, with [human trafficking remaining a rampant issue](#).

### Pressure as a Vector of Cooperation

The economic strain that a major decline in Chinese tourists could cause in the region has encouraged collaboration between China and Southeast Asian countries. China’s [people-to-people diplomacy](#) relies partly on engaging the general public in external

exchanges of culture; such diplomatic strategy can [be illustrated by the Confucius Institutes](#) around the world. Building on this idea, we can see China's efforts to recoup inbound and outbound tourists as both an economic and diplomatic act. As what we can arguably call a symbol of win-win cooperation in this context, China and Thailand signed a mutual visa waiver agreement to facilitate tourism between the two countries. This approach can effectively showcase China's cultural attractiveness, leading to a more positive global public view of the country. Considering that Chinese people have a [high degree of trust in the central government](#), China's signing of a mutual waiver with Thailand demonstrates that the government believes the country is safe for its population.

China's new tougher stance against scam centers in Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar, shows a strategic approach to combating transnational crimes driven by recent domestic discontentment. Despite [reported cooperation](#) with Myanmar's junta in dismantling scam centers, concerns linger over the junta's insufficient action against connected domestic criminal networks. In expressing [growing dissatisfaction](#), China seeks to bolster bilateral collaboration on tackling transnational crimes. Recent developments highlight China's strategic involvement in Myanmar, exemplified by the [tacit approval](#) of a successful military operation by [anti-junta rebel forces](#) in Northern Myanmar in late October 2023. Framed as a response to cross-border criminal activities, including scam centers, the operation aligns with Beijing's goal for regional stability near its border with Myanmar. The junta's [increased proactive role](#) in assisting China in repatriation since China's inaction on rebel force operations suggests a pragmatic alignment with Beijing's interests. China's pressure on the junta can be viewed as a potential catalyst for further collaboration. The evolving situation in Myanmar emphasizes the potential for future cooperation between the two nations in addressing transnational crimes.

### Can Corruption Channel Cooperation?

China's relative success in combating cybercrime, human trafficking, and organized crime with Interpol,

the [UN](#), and ASEAN is shadowed by concerns about [its extraterritorial reach](#) in international law enforcement. Following a decline in Chinese tourists after the movie release, Thai authorities hinted at allowing Chinese police patrols in tourist hotspots, [similar to practices in Italy, Serbia, and Croatia](#). This proposal faced public and Thai official opposition, labeling it a "breach of sovereignty." Globally, concern is rising about China's [covert overseas police stations](#), accused of controlling the diaspora and serving as outposts for foreign interference

In the battle against cross-border crime, China, Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand initiated [Mekong River Joint Patrols](#) in the Delta—a targeted, minilateral operation addressing the high mobility of crime syndicate operations. This joint effort allows police to 'keep each other in check' amid prevalent border police corruption. "No More Bets" emphasized this challenge, with Chinese investigators condemning local police corruption while repatriating trapped citizens. Despite President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption efforts, local government corruption, like [in Yunnan](#), only fuel scam center growth. Widespread corruption in the police force demands China and Southeast Asia shift from minilateral to multilateral cooperation, with third-party organizations like Interpol providing oversight to mitigate corruption risks. Multilateral operations, such as Interpol's Storm Makers II, should prioritize the roots of the issue by cracking down on scam centers and associated criminal organizations.

### Conclusion

The movie's vagueness over where the scam center operations were taking place made several Southeast Asian countries feel targeted. Between Burmese and Cambodian inscriptions and local greetings with their two hands joined, as is the custom in Thailand, the feeble attempt to avoid targeting anyone ended up targeting everyone. One thing is clear, the movie prompted strong objections in the region but eventually led to cooperation between states to seriously take on scam centers to 'restore their image'. Even if said cooperation is interest-driven, we cannot overlook the positive regional aspects that will ensue from enhanced people-to-people exchanges. What is interesting about the film "No More Bets" is the

real-life actions it generated on both an economic and diplomatic level. From human trafficking prevention, which was undoubtedly its primary goal, to economic pressure and then cooperation, the fallout that emerged after the movie's release quickly subdued and turned into a driving force for cooperation between China and Southeast Asia.

However, is China concerned with its citizens' safety or was it the strong condemnation of the movie from Southeast Asian states that prompted Beijing to step up its efforts to crack down on fraud-related criminal activities? It appears that Beijing is concerned by domestic opinions on the matter and successfully turned the impact of the movie in Southeast Asia to its advantage. It is unclear why the authorities in charge of controlling and censoring China's entertainment industry approved the film's release in the first place. While the movie's preventive purpose was evident from the start, concerns remain about whether the authorities could forecast the reaction of Southeast Asian countries or the damage to their reputation caused by the movie, or if the intention was to give a kick to the anthill. Arguably, in the end, the film had a positive impact on the area, laying the groundwork for mutually beneficial cooperation between China and Southeast Asian countries with differing interests but the same goal of eradicating scam centers.

China's response to the challenges presented by "No More Bets" not only reflects its commitment to combating transnational crime and promoting cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region but also resonated with domestic expectations. China can strengthen its status as a responsible global power by actively addressing the problems raised in the film, thereby contributing to regional stability and constructive international relations.

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