



**Global Engagement Center
Special Report:**

HOW THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA SEEKS TO RESHAPE THE GLOBAL INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

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PREFACE

As the U.S. Government's dedicated center for countering foreign disinformation and propaganda, the Global Engagement Center (GEC) at the U.S. Department of State has a Congressional mandate to recognize, understand, expose, and counter threats from state and non-state actors that engage in information manipulation.¹ In this field, the People's Republic of China (PRC) through its global activities remains a leading concern. The Department works with interagency and foreign partners to counter the challenge the PRC poses in the information domain, with GEC playing a key role in coordinating efforts and working to catalyze a global response.

One of GEC's central lines of effort is exposing the PRC's tactics to enable allied and partner governments and international civil society organizations, academia, the press, and publics to conduct further analysis, thereby increasing collective resilience to disinformation and propaganda.

In line with that goal, this report draws on publicly available reporting, as well as newly acquired government information, to outline how the PRC amplifies its preferred narratives and suppresses those it views as threatening. As the PRC has grown more confident in its power, it appears to have calculated that it can more aggressively pursue its interests via information manipulation. In recent years, the use of tactics ranging from threats and intimidation to the creation of fake media personae has garnered the attention of governments and civil society worldwide.

Beijing has invested billions of dollars to construct an information ecosystem in which PRC propaganda and disinformation gain traction and become dominant. The PRC's approach features five primary elements: leveraging propaganda and censorship, promoting digital authoritarianism, exploiting international organizations and bilateral partnerships, pairing cooptation and pressure, and exercising control of Chinese-language media. Together, these five mutually reinforcing elements enable Beijing to exert control over the narratives in the global information space through advancing false or biased pro-PRC content and suppressing critical voices.

The immediate goal of this report is to shed light on the tactics, techniques, and processes by which the PRC endeavors to use the information environment to its advantage. By publishing this report, we hope to inform the audiences targeted by the PRC and to empower governments, civil society, academia, the press, the private sector, and publics around the world to more effectively collaborate in their efforts to protect the integrity of the information space. This report is offered by GEC as a contribution to these shared efforts.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every country should have the ability to tell its story to the world. However, a nation's narrative should be based on facts and rise and fall on its own merits. The PRC employs a variety of deceptive and coercive methods as it attempts to influence the international information environment. Beijing's information manipulation spans the use of propaganda, disinformation, and censorship. Unchecked, the PRC's efforts will reshape the global information landscape, creating biases and gaps that could even lead nations to make decisions that subordinate their economic and security interests to Beijing's.

PRC Information Manipulation

The PRC spends billions of dollars annually on foreign information manipulation efforts.² Beijing uses false or biased information to promote positive views of the PRC and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). At the same time, the PRC suppresses critical information that contradicts its desired narratives on issues such as Taiwan, its human rights practices, the South China Sea, its domestic economy, and international economic engagement. More broadly, the PRC seeks to cultivate and uphold a global incentive structure that encourages foreign governments, elites, journalists, and civil society to accept its preferred narratives and avoid criticizing its conduct.

The PRC's approach to information manipulation includes leveraging propaganda and censorship, promoting digital authoritarianism, exploiting international organizations and bilateral partnerships, pairing cooptation and pressure, and exercising control of Chinese-language media. Collectively, these five elements could enable Beijing to reshape the global information environment along multiple axes:

Overt and covert influence over content and platforms. Beijing seeks to maximize the reach of biased or false pro-PRC content. It has acquired stakes in foreign media through public and non-public means and sponsored online influencers. Beijing has also secured sometimes restrictive content sharing agreements with local outlets that can result in trusted mastheads providing legitimacy to unlabeled or obscured PRC content. In addition, Beijing has also worked to coopt prominent voices in the international information environment such as foreign political elites and journalists. Beyond focusing on content producers, the PRC has targeted platforms for global information dissemination, for example, investing in digital television services in Africa and satellite networks.

Constraints on global freedom of expression. On issues it deems sensitive, the PRC has employed online and real-world intimidation to silence dissent and encourage self-censorship. The PRC has also taken measures against corporations in situations where they are perceived to have challenged its desired narratives on issues like Xinjiang. Within democratic countries, Beijing has taken advantage of open societies to take legal action to suppress critical voices. On WeChat, an application used by many Chinese-

speaking communities outside the PRC, Beijing has exercised technical censorship and harassed individual content producers. Notably, data harvested by PRC corporations operating overseas have enabled Beijing to fine-tune global censorship by targeting specific individuals and organizations.

An emerging community of digital authoritarians. The PRC promotes digital authoritarianism, which involves the use of digital infrastructure to repress freedom of expression, censor independent news, promote disinformation, and deny other human rights.³ Through disseminating technologies for surveillance and censorship, often through capabilities bundled under the umbrella of “smart” or “safe cities,” the PRC has exported aspects of its domestic information environment globally. Beijing has also propagated information control tactics, with a particular focus on Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In parallel, the PRC has promoted authoritarian digital norms that other countries have adopted at a rapid pace. As other countries emulate the PRC, their information ecosystems have become more receptive to Beijing’s propaganda, disinformation, and censorship requests.

Future Impact

The PRC’s global information manipulation is not simply a matter of public diplomacy – but a challenge to the integrity of the global information space. Unchecked, Beijing’s efforts could result in a future in which technology exported by the PRC, coopted local governments, and fear of Beijing’s direct retaliation produce a sharp contraction of global freedom of expression. Beijing would play a significant – and often hidden – role in determining the print and digital content that audiences in developing countries consume. Multilateral fora and select bilateral relationships would amplify Beijing’s preferred narratives on issues such as Taiwan and the international economy. Access to global data combined with the latest developments in artificial intelligence technology would enable the PRC to surgically target foreign audiences and thereby perhaps influence economic and security decisions in its favor. Lastly, Beijing’s global censorship efforts would result in a highly curated international information environment characterized by gaps and inherent pro-PRC biases.

In this future, the information available to publics, media, civil society, academia, and governments as they engage with the PRC could be distorted by propaganda and disinformation and circumscribed by censorship. This would pose a direct challenge to all nations that seek to predicate their relations with the PRC on fact-based assessments of their sovereign interests. This future is not pre-ordained. Although backed by unprecedented resources, the PRC’s propaganda and censorship have, to date, yielded mixed results. When targeting democratic countries, Beijing has encountered major setbacks, often due to pushback from local media and civil society. Global understanding of PRC information manipulation is a starting point for a future in which the PRC’s ideas, values, and stories must compete on an even playing field.

PRC Information Manipulation: Snapshots Drawn from Public Reporting and Government Information

FRANCE

PRC took legal action to intimidate a researcher critical of Huawei (page 29).

UNITED KINGDOM

Twitter bots artificially boosted engagement on PRC diplomat's account (page 13).

HONDURAS

New cooperation agreements between PRC and Honduran state outlets created an opening for Beijing to distribute false or biased content (page 13).

ISRAEL

PRC Embassy attempted to pressure a leading newspaper to retract content (page 17).

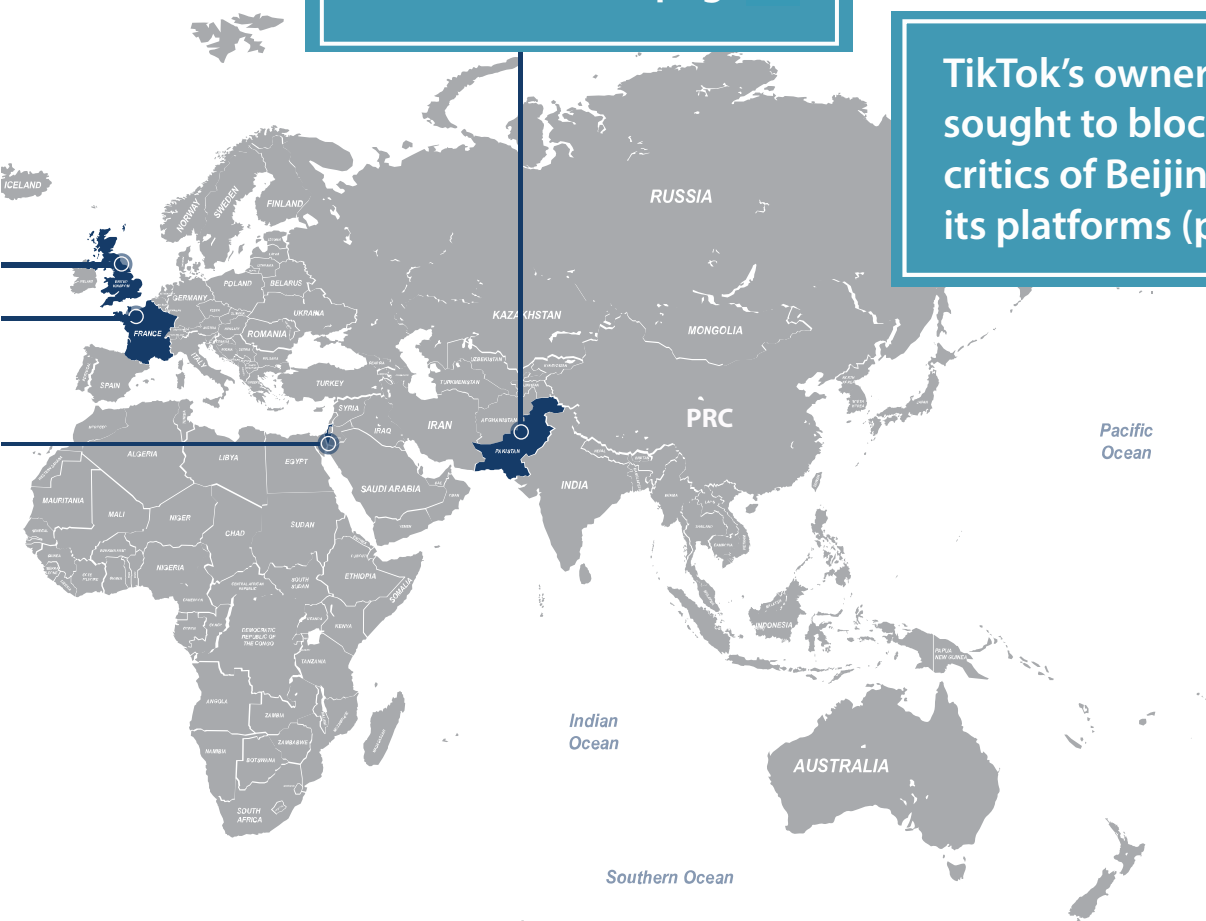
Arctic Ocean

PAKISTAN

PRC sought to gain significant control over Pakistani media (page 28).

GLOBAL

TikTok's owner ByteDance sought to block potential critics of Beijing from using its platforms (page 21).



EAST AFRICA

PRC paid for favorable coverage in a local newspaper while concealing sponsorship of content (page 8).

INTRODUCTION

Most of this report describes the main elements of PRC information manipulation. To provide context to these later sections, this introduction defines key terms and offers background on Beijing's approach to shaping the information environment.

Key Terms

The following terms appear widely throughout the report:

- **Propaganda:** The selective use of information, including false information, to promote arguments for political effect.
- **Censorship:** Efforts to limit the free flow of information, including through technological means and the threat or use of coercion.
- **Disinformation:** The intentional creation and dissemination of false content to mislead an audience.
- **Information Manipulation:** The use of propaganda, disinformation, and censorship to create an international information environment conducive to a nation's policy objectives.

These are working definitions offered as a guidepost for readers. An extensive body of scholarship exists around malign efforts to shape the information space that defines these terms in greater detail.

The PRC's Approach to Information Manipulation

President Xi has significantly expanded PRC efforts to shape the global information environment. In 2013, he directed state media to "tell China's story well."⁴ In 2021, President Xi pressed PRC state media to strengthen their propaganda efforts and tailor "precise communication methods" to influence foreign audiences globally. Publicly available estimates indicate that Beijing spends billions of dollars annually on foreign information manipulation efforts – an investment that is growing.⁵

The PRC commands a massive state media ecosystem which includes official messaging, diplomatic communications, messaging guidance to state-owned enterprises, and less overt proxies such as new media "influencers" – many of whom are PRC state media employees who obscure their affiliation – all working to promote positive views of Beijing's policies. The CCP's Central Propaganda Department (CPD) and United Front Work Department (UFWD) oversee much of this messaging under the guidance of leading small groups. UFWD is responsible for propaganda targeting Chinese diaspora communities, for example, and coordinates and oversees strategic acquisition of and investment in overseas media.⁶ The China Media Group (CMG), which consists of PRC state media enterprises China Central Television (CCTV), China National Radio (CNR), China Radio International (CRI), and China Global Television Network (CGTN), is under the

supervision of the CPD. In official contexts, CMG is frank about its role in PRC messaging. CMG's 2021 social media responsibilities report, for example, states its objective is to "faithfully execute the duty and mission of the Party's ideological center."⁷

When amplifying its desired narratives and suppressing critical voices overseas, the PRC draws on practices it has pioneered domestically. Within its borders, the PRC curates an information environment that prevents local or foreign voices from providing accurate information that could generate popular pressure on national authorities. The PRC's ability to shape the information environment its citizens experience is exemplified in how Beijing portrays periods of tension with the United States. For example, in the wake of then-Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's delegation to Taiwan in August 2022, the PRC heavily amplified propaganda about Beijing's diplomatic, military, and economic countermeasures against the United States, including a series of exercises by the People's Liberation Army. At the same time, PRC censors suppressed foreign statements that criticized those exercises as dangerous or that argued the PRC overreacted to the delegation.⁸ This capability to prevent accurate information from reaching PRC media consumers while flooding the space with approved narratives allows Beijing to exploit a strategic asymmetry in public messaging capabilities, preventing the U.S. and other governments from having genuine conversations that could strengthen bilateral trust and genuine people-to-people ties.

ELEMENT 1:

Leveraging Propaganda and Censorship

Since its founding in 1921, the CCP has used information manipulation to ensure regime survival and increase its power. Today, as the PRC seeks to reshape the international order to its advantage, Beijing builds on this legacy by leveraging propaganda and censorship.

Key Takeaways

- Beijing seeks to maximize the distribution of pro-PRC content to worldwide audiences, combining traditional public diplomacy with false content and deceptive practices. Its tactics include the expansion of its overt global network of state media outlets, direct purchase of foreign media, sometimes restrictive content-sharing agreements with local outlets, stepped up diplomatic engagement with foreign media, promoting media partnerships, sponsoring online influencers, and misrepresenting official commentary.
- The PRC censors critical voices globally through technical, coercive, and diplomatic capabilities. Beijing employs manipulative social media tactics such as use of bots and trolls to amplify pro-PRC content and drown out critical voices. The PRC also uses online and real-world intimidation to silence dissent and encourage self-censorship. Additionally, PRC diplomats pressure host-nation media and academic institutions to adhere to preferred narratives and refrain from providing platforms to critics.

Maximizing the Distribution of False or Biased Pro-PRC Content

Beijing employs a worldwide investment strategy to expand ownership and control of information dissemination channels to maximize the distribution of false or biased pro-PRC content to global audiences. The PRC has made a concerted effort to expand distribution of favorable content through the following lines of effort:

Expansion of State-Owned Media. Over the past decade, the PRC has invested heavily in its state-owned media. Today, PRC state-owned media outlets have expansive print, digital, and social media properties in at least 12 languages, reaching audiences across the globe. Beijing's highest profile outlets for foreign audiences are CGTN, China Daily, CRI, Xinhua, and China News Service (CNS). Xinhua, the PRC's official state news agency, launched 40 new foreign bureaus between 2009 and 2011, reached 162 total in 2017, and ultimately maintained 181 bureaus in 142 countries and regions as of August 2021.⁹ Some of these bureaus are massive – for example, as of 2020, the largest, in Nairobi, Kenya, supported 150 journalists and 400 staff producing 1,800 stories a month.¹⁰ It is important to note, however, that this rapid expansion has not necessarily increased audience share or perceived credibility of PRC media. In the Asia-Pacific, CGTN is the 10th most popular broadcaster, with an audience that is a fraction of CNN's.¹¹

Direct Purchase of Foreign Media Outlets. The PRC augments its state-owned media apparatus and editorial control by directly purchasing foreign news outlets. For example, after a PRC conglomerate purchased a controlling stake in the Czech Republic's Empresa Media and Medea in 2015, outlets associated with both groups ramped up favorable coverage of Beijing. More generally, in the decade preceding 2018, the PRC invested approximately 3 billion euros in European media properties.¹² In some cases, the PRC has evaded media transparency rules to secure ownership of media outlets. For example, Australia-based Global CAMG, which is majority-owned by PRC state media giant CRI, circumvented Thai law limiting foreign media ownership in 2011 when it acquired a popular Thai radio station through a Thai intermediary. After this purchase, the station's online news coverage focused "exclusively" on the PRC with a pro-Beijing bias, according to analysis by CNA.¹³ One of the PRC's leading technology companies, Tencent, worked around Thai law in the same way in 2016 when it created a Thai subsidiary, run by Thai nationals, to purchase Sanook, the country's most popular news site with 30 million active monthly users.¹⁴

Beyond online and traditional news outlets, PRC-owned companies invest in cable TV service providers, enabling Beijing to influence content in various delivery platforms at the local level. For example, the PRC has become a leading provider of digital television services in Africa through StarTimes. In 2019, StarTimes reached 10 million subscribers in 30 African countries.¹⁵ Today, the company is considered the market leader in Africa, with coverage extending to 90 percent of the continent's population. Other PRC companies with similar offerings are making forays into South and Southeast Asia.¹⁶ By controlling cable TV service providers, the PRC gains the power to determine which stations viewers can access by excluding Western news channels from basic packages and pricing packages with their inclusion beyond the purchasing power of subscribers. For example, the cheapest packages available in some countries at around \$1 to \$2 a month include CGTN and dubbed Chinese entertainment content but do not include Western news channels.¹⁷

Publishing PRC-Made Content in Foreign Media Outlets. PRC state media use content-sharing agreements with foreign local media outlets, a technique often referred to as "borrowing a boat to reach the sea," to place PRC propaganda under mastheads of trusted media and to activate networks of pro-Beijing commentators to extend the reach of pro-PRC narratives to foreign audiences.¹⁸ Some content-sharing agreements with foreign news outlets include exclusivity clauses that prevent them from reaching agreements with Western-sourced wire services that could result in the distribution of content inconsistent with the PRC's desired narratives. CCTV provides free video footage and television scripts to 1,700 foreign news organizations and media groups.¹⁹ In many cases, content produced by CGTN or People's Daily is repackaged for local media without branding that would identify it as coming from a foreign government. Xinhua has content sharing agreements with outlets in Australia, Italy, Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, Belarus, and Vietnam, among many other countries.²⁰

Unattributed PRC Content in African Media

According to U.S. Government information, in spring 2021 the PRC government representatives in an East African country reached an agreement with a local newspaper to publish articles favorable to the PRC. The PRC government representatives and the newspaper agreed that the paid articles would not have a direct connection to the PRC. This type of agreement – in which information provided by Beijing runs under a trusted masthead without attribution – distorts the local information environment and reduces the ability of publics to make fact-based assessments about the PRC.

Enhancing PRC Diplomats' Media Engagement. Following the lead of the PRC's top foreign-oriented media outlets, PRC diplomats are increasingly using online platforms with global reach, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, to push state-owned media content. Typically, PRC ambassadors share English-language articles from Global Times, CGTN, or China Daily, all of which can serve as an easily accessed repository of official language and talking points. PRC diplomats abroad have become increasingly active in public engagement. In 22 of the 30 countries Freedom House examined in its 2022 research on Beijing's global media influence, the PRC ambassador or other officials published ten or more op-eds from 2019 to 2021. In countries including Argentina, Mexico, Nigeria, and South Africa, PRC diplomats published as many as 50 op-eds during this period, sometimes pursuant to specific content-sharing agreements that allowed these officials to reach audiences directly without editorial oversight.²¹ According to former U.S. Agency for Global Media staff, PRC diplomats sought to convince radio and television broadcasters in foreign countries such as Indonesia to drop U.S. Government-funded programming in favor of CGTN and CRI, sometimes offering financial incentives to the stations targeted.²² PRC diplomats have also demonstrated an ability to combine incentives and pressure to turn around the tone of specific publications regarding the PRC. According to Spanish journalist Juan Pablo Cardenal, in the mid-2010s PRC officials gradually lessened Argentine paper La Nación's criticism of the PRC and elicited more positive reporting through a mixture of elite capture and large ad buys to increase the paper's dependency on PRC commercial entities.²³

Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Amplifies PRC Diplomatic Messaging

Following decades of primarily broadcasting positive narratives about the PRC to foreign audiences, Beijing has shifted to embracing the coordinated use of disinformation when it suits its purposes, often using inauthentic bot networks to amplify messaging. The PRC first began to experiment with coordinated foreign-facing disinformation campaigns in its response to the 2019 Hong Kong pro-democracy protests.²⁴ Following the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, PRC officials and state media built on this new playbook of coordinated falsehoods to deflect scrutiny from the PRC at any cost.²⁵ In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, PRC officials and media readily began amplifying the Kremlin's falsehoods.²⁶

PRC diplomats promote pro-Beijing narratives and disinformation and attack critics with the assistance of automated bot networks. The PRC's official presence on Twitter, a key platform for such efforts, grew from a handful of diplomatic accounts to more than 170 between mid-2019 and October 2020.²⁷ As of August 2023, the PRC maintained 333 diplomatic and official media accounts with nearly 65 million followers combined.²⁸ Networks of bots routinely amplify diplomats' posts, in some cases exclusively engaging with diplomats posted in a specific country. Between June 2020 and January 2021, a single coordinated network comprising dozens of accounts impersonating UK citizens generated 44 percent of the retweets of then-PRC Ambassador to the UK Liu Xiaoming's posts, 20 percent of the replies to his posts, and up to three quarters of all engagement during weeks in November 2020 and January 2021.²⁹ Although more than half of Liu's retweets during this period came from accounts that were ultimately suspended for violating Twitter's terms of service at the time, new accounts continued to pop up to prolong this inauthentic amplification, indicating how easily the PRC can establish and sustain these networks.³⁰

Promotion of Partnership Networks. Apart from directly delivering messages via its diplomats and state-controlled flagship media, Beijing invests in official media cooperation and partnership networks to advance its core narratives. In 2018, the state-affiliated All-China Journalists Association (ACJA) convened the “Belt and Road Journalists Forum,” which attracted representatives from nearly 50 countries. Among the forum’s goals: “organize joint news collection and increase the sharing of information.”³¹ In 2019, the PRC launched the Belt and Road News Network (BRNN) under the auspices of CCP-controlled People’s Daily. The network nominally shares content from all its members, including media organizations from at least 24 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America.³² In fact, by 2020 the network appeared to only provide contributions from the People’s Daily. In 2023, immediately after Beijing established formal diplomatic relations with Honduras, CMG and Xinhua opened local offices and signed a cooperation agreement with Honduran state media involving content sharing and staff training.³³ The PRC in 2023 also announced agreements concerning, among other things, promoting co-production in television and cinema during Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva’s visit to Beijing.³⁴

Sponsorship of Online Influencers. The PRC leverages social media influencers to communicate directly with foreign audiences. In many cases these efforts are more successful than the PRC’s efforts through official propaganda organs. As of 2021, almost 100 influencers disseminated official PRC messaging in at least two dozen languages on multiple social media platforms to a combined audience of over 11 million followers in dozens of countries.³⁵ In recent years, Beijing has used domestic influencers drawn from ethnic minorities in China to generate content for global audiences on YouTube in a bid to obscure its human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Tibet. These influencers – politically vetted and managed by professional agencies known as multi-channel networks (MCNs) – actively propagate the PRC’s preferred narratives. These firms began to emerge in 2018, growing to about 28,000 registered companies in the PRC by 2020, and work closely in the PRC with propaganda and cyberspace authorities.³⁶ Notably, MCNs enable their online influencers to speak on platforms banned domestically within the PRC and serve as a conduit for YouTube advertising revenue.³⁷ Even some journalists and media personalities who acknowledge their PRC state links go unlabeled on major social media platforms. Some of these influencer accounts reach millions of users in the Middle East and North Africa, mainly posting innocuous content about culture, humor, and daily life, ostensibly to attract followers, and interspersing posts containing pro-Beijing propaganda.³⁸

Laundering Official Commentary. According to U.S. Government information, PRC officials sometimes produce English-language articles attributed to authors without discernable links to the PRC Government and disseminate them via local media outlets in various regions. PRC officials sometimes attribute relevant content to specific authors under false names, likely to conceal the PRC’s role in producing it and falsely purporting to represent legitimate, organic sentiment in a given region. In addition, PRC officials are known in some cases to attribute such manufactured commentaries to “international affairs commentators” and then use other individual, non-official accounts to promote these commentaries. As one example, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) uses a manufactured persona named Yi Fan, often credited as a “Beijing-based international affairs commentator,” to deceptively promote pro-Beijing views on a wide variety of

topics and regions. The PRC MFA uses this manufactured persona, and likely others like it, to collaboratively author articles seeking to influence local information environments around the world in the PRC's favor.

Suppressing Perspectives that Clash with Preferred PRC Narratives

Beijing pairs investments to maximize the reach of biased or false pro-PRC content with the global censorship of critical voices. Its toolkit for marginalizing alternative perspectives includes manipulative social media tactics, monitoring communications, online and real-world intimidation, and diplomatic pressure.

Manipulative Social Media Tactics. Beijing employs bots, trolls, and coordinated campaigns among inauthentic social media accounts to boost pro-PRC content and suppress critical content. Through flooding – a tactic that manipulates search engine results and hashtag searches – the PRC drowns out information around sensitive topics or events with unrelated content and renders fact-based, substantive information more difficult for users to find.³⁹ Recent PRC flooding campaigns include an attempt to hijack the #GenocideGames hashtag during the 2022 Winter Olympics to marginalize efforts by foreign activists to raise awareness of the PRC's genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang.⁴⁰ Over 1,000 pro-PRC accounts also sought to bury a report by the Spain-based nongovernmental organization Safeguard Defenders detailing the presence and coercive activities of 100 “overseas police service stations” in 53 countries linked to local PRC public security authorities across multiple jurisdictions. Many of these stations were operating illegally without the knowledge or consent of host governments. Pro-PRC accounts generated spam posts from accounts with the same name as that of Safeguard Defenders, possibly seeking to trigger Twitter's automatic de-boosting response.⁴¹

Imposter Accounts Flood Twitter to Drown Out Criticism of the PRC

As of August 2023, at least 265 accounts are targeting @SafeguardDefend in a coordinated information manipulation operation



Monitoring Communications. Beijing seeks to monitor and potentially disrupt overseas criticism via infrastructure, mobile phones, and other network devices installed or produced by PRC corporations. For example, Federated States of Micronesia President David Panuelo warned other Pacific Island Country (PICs) leaders in May 2022 that Beijing sought “influence in [PIC] government[s]” through a proposed sweeping PRC-PICs agreement which included, among other things, “control and ownership of [PICs] communications infrastructure.”⁴² Some PRC-produced devices natively possess the capability to censor users in foreign countries, even if these functions are not always active. In September 2021, Lithuania’s National Cyber Security Centre reported that phones manufactured by PRC corporation Xiaomi had a default capability to censor a list of at least 449 phrases including “Free Tibet,” “Long live Taiwan independence,” and “democracy movement.”⁴³ This “feature” was inactive in phones shipped to Europe, according to the Lithuanian report, but could be activated remotely, raising concerns that Beijing could without warning block such content for the 24 percent of European smartphone users owning Xiaomi handsets at that time.⁴⁴

Online and Real-World Intimidation. The PRC combines social media manipulation with online and real-world intimidation and harassment of critics to silence dissent and encourage self-censorship, blurring the lines between its domestic and foreign information manipulation. PRC security elements, foreign affairs authorities, and others lead an interagency effort to identify and control the accounts of online critics of Beijing both domestically and overseas, in effect exporting aspects of the PRC’s domestic censorship apparatus. According to U.S. Government information, relevant authorities work in concert with private PRC-based companies to identify and locate critics abroad who might have considered online anonymity a protection against PRC government retaliation or harassment. Authorities have used this public-private coordination to seek blocking of users or deletion of posts concerning topics including among others advocacy for veterans’ benefits, complaints about the PRC’s COVID-19 response and associated lockdowns, and criticism of police investigations.

The expanded extraterritorial application of PRC domestic laws presents unique challenges to freedom of expression in other countries. The wide-ranging and vague PRC Law on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, commonly called the National Security Law, criminalizes criticism of the PRC and Hong Kong governments regardless of where it occurs, threatening the arrest of anyone traveling through Hong Kong or any country with an extradition agreement with the PRC.⁴⁵ Beijing’s long-arm tactics create additional incentives for self-censorship.

Diplomatic Pressure. PRC diplomats pressure host-nation media and academic institutions to adhere to desired narratives. PRC diplomats have directly threatened universities and newspapers with retaliation, ordering them to take down content they deem offensive. For example, PRC ambassador to France Lu Shaye repeatedly attacked and criticized the French press for allegedly “lying” about and “making fun of” the PRC.⁴⁶ Similarly, the PRC consulate in Düsseldorf and PRC universities pressured two German universities to cancel discussions of a book about President Xi, even though the local Confucius Institutes were the hosts. The PRC Consul in Düsseldorf personally intervened to cancel one of the events, according to the book’s

publisher.⁴⁷ In May 2022, after the Jerusalem Post published an interview with Taiwan’s foreign minister, the paper’s editor-in-chief tweeted that the PRC Embassy in Israel contacted him directly and threatened to downgrade ties with Israel unless the paper published a retraction – a threat that did not then materialize after the paper refused to comply.⁴⁸

Conclusion

PRC propaganda and censorship degrade the quality of the international information environment. Through tactics such as acquiring stakes in foreign media outlets, content sharing agreements, and sponsoring online influencers, Beijing is gaining the ability to shape the content foreign audiences consume, sometimes without their knowledge. The global scale of Beijing’s censorship efforts – predicated on tools ranging from communications monitoring to real-world intimidation to diplomatic pressure – diminishes international access to fact-based information about the PRC. The next section turns to the second element of PRC information manipulation – promoting digital authoritarianism.

ELEMENT 2

Promoting Digital Authoritarianism

Through exporting surveillance technologies while advancing authoritarian norms of digital governance, the PRC seeks to reshape the global information environment in ways that expand the reach and traction of its propaganda and censorship efforts while normalizing these practices internationally.

Key Takeaways

- The PRC seeks to export aspects of its domestic information environment globally. It disseminates technologies for surveillance and censorship, often through capabilities bundled under the umbrella of “smart” or “safe cities.” Beijing also propagates information control tactics, with a particular focus on developing countries. In parallel, the PRC advances international norms that align with the information control technologies and tactics that it exports, as other countries’ use of these technologies serves to normalize the PRC’s policies.
- Digital authoritarianism reinforces the PRC’s overall information manipulation efforts. Data harvested by PRC corporations operating overseas enables Beijing to track foreign sentiment and fine-tune global messaging and censorship by targeting specific individuals and organizations. As other countries adopt the PRC’s approach to digital governance, their domestic information ecosystems become more receptive to Beijing’s propaganda and censorship efforts. Lastly, PRC companies’ access to data on a global scale coupled with domestic legal requirements that they “support, assist, and cooperate with national intelligence work” affords Beijing with an opportunity to collect foreign intelligence that can in turn inform its efforts to communicate with foreign audiences.⁴⁹

Exporting Information Control Technology, Tactics, and Norms

The PRC seeks to export aspects of its domestic information environment. This outward-facing digital authoritarianism involves the global promotion of PRC surveillance technology, information control tactics, and norms for governing the digital domain.

Disseminating Surveillance Technology. The PRC has a history of helping other governments build and maintain information and communications technology (ICT) systems for domestic surveillance and censorship. For example, PRC telecommunications giant ZTE has operated in Ethiopia since at least 2000 and was its sole provider of telecommunications equipment from 2006 to 2009.⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch found that the Ethiopian government has used equipment provided by ZTE and by several European companies to monitor telecom activity.⁵¹ Today, the PRC exports digital ecosystems like “smart” or “safe cities” to assist in surveillance.⁵² On paper, these systems promise to make daily life more convenient by fusing ubiquitous data gathering in urban environments with advanced machine processing capabilities. These same systems can also facilitate pervasive invasions of privacy and pose national security risks.⁵³

Many PRC companies that produce components integrated into “smart city” systems have actively supported Beijing’s surveillance and repression in Xinjiang, whether through developing AI programs trained to recognize the Uyghur language and Uyghur faces or by providing cloud computing services for local police.⁵⁴ Research by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) identified 163 global smart city-public security projects outside the PRC as of June 2021 involving PRC firms that have operations in Xinjiang, including Huawei, Hikvision, China Unicom, ZTE, CETC, YITU, Megvii, DJI, Dahua, SenseTime, Beidou, Inspur, and Alibaba.⁵⁵

Acquiring Satellites to Control Information Dissemination

In parallel with exporting surveillance technology, the PRC invests in the enabling nodes of information dissemination, such as global satellite networks. Beijing’s sovereign investment fund China Investment Corporation acquired a seven percent stake in French satellite fleet operator Eutelsat in 2012 and has since sought to use it to deliver PRC propaganda.⁵⁶ In 2017, China Central Television signed a distribution deal with Eutelsat to broadcast three of its channels in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.⁵⁷ In August 2022, the EU ruled out a proposed merger between Eutelsat and British firm OneWeb due in part to concerns about the PRC’s stake.⁵⁸ As of late 2022, the PRC reportedly planned to use a Eutelsat-owned satellite to broadcast state media content from a ground station in Xinjiang to audiences in Africa.⁵⁹ Controlling satellite networks provides the PRC with another tool to shape the content that foreign audiences receive and use to form their views of Beijing.

Propagating Information Control Tactics. The PRC offers governments training on how to use technology to emulate aspects of the CCP’s social controls. The most important tools help governments more effectively monitor their domestic information environments to identify, monitor, and respond to criticism or opposition. As of 2019, PRC information controls had diffused to 102 countries, helping legitimize the PRC’s domestic governance practices and lock in the CCP’s control over information.⁶⁰ In 11 of these countries, the deepest diffusion of PRC information control tactics resulted in imitation, or outright replication, of PRC information control laws and techniques.⁶¹ As noted by the Congressionally mandated U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Beijing has in recent years become “increasingly transparent in its ambitions to export key elements” of its domestic toolbox, including high-tech surveillance and censorship.⁶²

Promoting Authoritarian Norms of Digital Governance. The PRC simultaneously advances international norms that align with the information control technologies and tactics that it exports. Beijing's initiatives in cyberspace governance largely focus on influencing standard-setting bodies to ensure international technical norms are favorable to Beijing's preferences. PRC messaging uses the term "community of common destiny in cyberspace," which is intended to elevate Beijing's desired policies in the development of future international cyber norms to legitimize repressive practices.⁶³ PRC companies' export of "smart city"-related systems can directly help promote Beijing's preferred norms concerning digital governance. In September 2022, according to U.S. Government information, a PRC state-owned electronics firm pitched to a state-level government in Nigeria a comprehensive "safe city" package that the company claimed would enable "preemptive enforcement of the Law." According to sales materials, the state-owned firm offered systems that could, for example, enhance government control of the region by automatically comparing targets' faces and license plates to grey- and blacklists. Adopting these highly intrusive systems, the firm argued, would lead to higher economic growth, underscoring the link between the export of such systems and PRC support for normalizing the view that economic growth should take priority over individual rights. There is no evidence that any Nigerian locality ultimately procured the system in question, but this vignette exemplifies how the PRC fuses the export of surveillance technology and authoritarian digital norms, rendering the information ecosystems of targeted countries more receptive to its global censorship efforts.

Digital Authoritarianism Reinforces PRC Information Manipulation

Promoting digital authoritarianism reinforces Beijing's overall information manipulation efforts. Specifically, it enables the PRC to more effectively target its propaganda, disinformation, and censorship globally.

Refining Overseas Messaging and Censorship. Beijing applies its domestic opinion analysis techniques overseas by trawling the international information environment for politically sensitive or personally identifiable data and using it to refine messaging campaigns and monitor critics.⁶⁴ The PRC's data-gathering ecosystem leverages both PRC companies and their foreign partners including Western universities. For example, the PRC government-run Language Big Data Alliance seeks to deepen ties with international researchers focusing on big data analytic and natural language processing in part to gain access to their datasets and networks.⁶⁵ This grants the PRC "front door" access to sensitive data from around the world, with no "back door" or malicious break-in needed.⁶⁶ PRC information technology companies actively collect and process enormous amounts of personally identifiable data across multiple international jurisdictions, according to ASPI analysis of 27 such companies' activities.⁶⁷ The U.S. National Intelligence Council assessed in a declassified April 2020 report that Beijing "has demonstrated its willingness" to leverage the global activities of PRC companies to aid its overseas surveillance and censorship and that the PRC will have increasing opportunities to do so in the future.⁶⁸

The activities of PRC corporations overseas facilitate collection of data to fine-tune PRC information manipulation.⁶⁹ The National Intelligence Council's 2020 report assessed that broad commercial access to data will enable Beijing to "automate identification of individuals and organizations" outside the PRC to

target in its information manipulation operations.⁷⁰ For example, the CCP's Central Propaganda Department seeks to mine public Twitter data to track foreign negative sentiment toward PRC leadership, map relationships between critics, and "fight the public opinion war overseas," according to PRC government bidding documents and contracts.⁷¹ For example, the Washington Post found that Beijing purchased a program to scrape social media to create a database of foreign academics and journalists and another program to monitor Western discussion of Hong Kong and Taiwan.⁷² Mass data collection by firms such as Global Tone Communication Technology Co. Ltd., a subsidiary of a state-owned corporation ultimately controlled by the CCP's Propaganda Department, help Beijing to refine its understanding of possible threats to state security through big data analysis of topics generating interest among regional audiences.⁷³

Advancing a Global Infrastructure for Surveillance and Censorship. As other countries adopt the PRC's approach to digital governance, their domestic information ecosystems become more receptive to Beijing's propaganda and disinformation efforts. With assistance from Beijing, African governments have used Huawei systems worth hundreds of millions of dollars to support police work and even to intercept the electronic communications and cellular location data of domestic political opposition members.⁷⁴ Mauritius' digital ecosystem, which features surveillance technologies provided by Huawei in 2019, offers both domestic and foreign actors "alarming new powers through control over data," according to University of Mauritius Associate Professor Kasenally Roukaya. This includes attempts by authorities to channel social media posts through government-controlled servers.⁷⁵ In November 2021, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that governments in at least 18 countries used Huawei-manufactured middleboxes, which facilitate and inspect internet traffic on some online networks, to block access to certain sites.⁷⁶ Narratives that challenge the PRC may struggle to gain wider visibility in tightly controlled information environments.

TikTok Creates Opportunities for PRC Global Censorship

TikTok's owner ByteDance seeks to block potential critics of Beijing, possibly including those outside the PRC, from using its platforms. According to U.S. Government information, as of late 2020, ByteDance maintained a regularly updated internal list identifying people who were likely blocked or restricted from all ByteDance platforms, including TikTok, for reasons such as advocating for Uyghur independence. ByteDance directed that specific individuals be added to this list if they were deemed to pose a public sentiment risk, likely to prevent criticism of the PRC government from spreading on ByteDance-owned platforms. This example illustrates how the spread of PRC digital platforms globally creates new opportunities for Beijing to censor views that run counter to its promoted narratives on issues such as Xinjiang.

Exploiting Intelligence Collection to Shape Messaging. PRC companies' access to data on a global scale affords Beijing an opportunity to collect foreign intelligence. The PRC's 2017 National Intelligence Law requires all organizations and citizens to "support, assist, and cooperate with national intelligence work" and to refrain from disclosing their cooperation with national authorities.⁷⁷ PRC intelligence services use these legal authorities to effectively commandeer PRC corporations' resources for national security work. Beijing tasks leading PRC technology companies "on a daily basis" with processing bulk data to glean intelligence from them, according to former senior U.S. counterintelligence official William Evanina.⁷⁸ Beijing likely gains insights into the international information environment from this collaboration, including identifying individuals that should be targeted in information manipulation campaigns.

Moreover, the PRC exploits its provision of physical facilities to foreign governments to acquire intelligence. In 2018, after the PRC government funded the 2012 construction of a new headquarters for the African Union (AU) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, AU employees discovered that hackers, allegedly from the PRC, had set up servers to secretly record and exfiltrate audio and video footage from the new buildings.⁷⁹ According to the Heritage Foundation, as of May 2020, PRC companies had constructed and/or renovated at least 186 sensitive government buildings in Africa and at least 14 ostensibly "secure" intragovernmental telecommunications networks, which PRC authorities almost certainly use to gather intelligence.⁸⁰ This intelligence in turn can inform how Beijing optimizes its narratives to appeal to African elites.

Weaponizing Diplomatic Outposts to Target Dissenting Voices. The PRC uses its embassies and consulates to obtain intelligence that feeds into its global efforts to target dissenting voices. According to leaked classified PRC documents, embassy and consular staff abroad collect information on Uyghurs living overseas and feed this information back to PRC law enforcement for use in possible investigation or detention upon their return to the PRC. The International Consortium of International Journalists, which published the leaked documents, reported that the Integrated Joint Operations Platform, the "cybernetic brain" supporting PRC law enforcement's repression in Xinjiang, generated a list of 4,341 people who applied for travel documents at PRC embassies or consulates and whom authorities should arrest upon their return to the PRC.⁸¹

Conclusion

The PRC's promotion of digital authoritarianism is reshaping the global information environment in ways conducive to Beijing's propaganda, disinformation, and censorship. The technology and norms Beijing exports is creating an architecture for targeted messaging and identification of critical voices overseas. The next section turns to the third element of PRC information manipulation – exploiting international organizations and bilateral relationships.

ELEMENT 3

Exploiting International Organizations and Bilateral Relationships

Just as the PRC's digital authoritarianism serves to boost its propaganda and censorship efforts, the PRC uses international organizations and bilateral partnerships to amplify its preferred narratives and suppress views and voices that challenge its perspective.

Key Takeaways

- The PRC uses international organizations as platforms to amplify information aligned with its policy narratives. This is particularly the case with respect to PRC efforts to isolate Taiwan from the international community and shut it out from meaningful international participation. Additionally, Beijing's efforts to use the information space in multilateral organizations in support of its policy objectives include retroactively altering the historical documents of international organizations and a failed attempt to rewrite data entry procedures for global logistics. Working through multilateral organizations, the PRC seeks to restructure digital governance in ways conducive to censorship and surveillance. Simultaneously, Beijing promotes norms in UN governing documents that reinforce its signature foreign policy initiatives, domestic practices, and CCP ideology.
- Bilaterally, the PRC uses high-level summits and agreements to amplify its desired narratives regarding issues ranging from its domestic political system to Taiwan and Xinjiang. With close partners, the PRC also seeks to secure cooperation to refute narratives in traditional and online media spaces that threaten its interests. Within democratic countries, the PRC takes advantage of open societies to maximize the reach of its messaging through lobbying while taking legal action to suppress critical voices.

Beijing's use of propaganda and censorship in the context of international organizations reinforces the other elements of its information manipulation approach. Through multilateral fora, the PRC seeks to shape global narratives in its favor while lending normative support to its vision of digital governance.

Challenging Unfavorable Narratives. Beijing pushes back in multilateral fora against narratives that run counter to its foreign policy objectives. PRC efforts to limit Taiwan's role in international organizations are a prime example. Beijing has sought to rewrite history in pursuit of this goal of shrinking Taiwan's international space. The International Telecommunication Union retroactively changed references from "Taiwan" to "Taiwan, China" or "Taiwan, Province of China" during the 2015-2022 tenure of ITU Secretary-General Zhao Houlin, a PRC national supported and nominated by the PRC.⁸² More recently, in 2021, the PRC unsuccessfully attempted to force through a revision to the United Nations Code for Transport Locations (LOCODE) that could have damaged Taiwan's role as a key node in global supply chains. The proposed revision would have made the PRC the default approver of changes to supply chain nodes in Taiwan, effectively granting PRC authorities the ability to modify or remove the global transport industry's

access to the island.⁸³ As another example, in 2020 the International Civil Aviation Organization – when under the leadership of a PRC citizen – blocked social media users asking about Taiwan’s exclusion from the organization.⁸⁴

The PRC also seeks to prevent narratives challenging its domestic practices and foreign policy from gaining traction in multilateral organizations. According to Human Rights Watch, Beijing uses its influence in the UN to obstruct the participation of human rights-focused nongovernmental organizations and has tried to reduce the number of human rights posts in the UN.⁸⁵ PRC officials also eject or bar from UN premises specific experts whose testimony would cast Beijing in an unfavorable light.⁸⁶ At the UN Human Rights Council in 2019, in response to UN-centered criticism of Beijing’s conduct in Xinjiang, the PRC marshalled a letter of support from a group of mostly authoritarian countries commending its human rights record.⁸⁷ More recently, the PRC sought to prohibit the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from releasing a report in August 2022 documenting its abuses in Xinjiang.⁸⁸

Amplifying Support for Preferred Narratives. Beijing leverages multilateral fora to build positive narratives around its foreign policy initiatives. PRC nationals at the UN have sought to conflate the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Development Initiative (GDI) with larger multilateral objectives such as the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁸⁹ For example, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), which PRC nationals have led since 2007, has repeatedly endorsed BRI by releasing studies, convening high-profile fora, and explicitly tying the BRI to the UN and SDGs.⁹⁰ More recently, PRC officials have framed the GDI’s Group of Friends at the UN as “an effective platform for discussing plans for implementing” the SDGs.⁹¹

Restructuring Digital Norms with an Authoritarian Vision. Beijing’s efforts to use international governance mechanisms to promote aspects of its own information environment management serve both normative and practical objectives. Key to its ambitions is the building of a “community of common destiny in cyberspace,” which is intended to elevate the PRC’s voice and desired policies in the development of future international cyber norms to legitimize repressive practices.⁹² The PRC’s promotion of its own views on cyberspace governance heavily emphasizes the idea of cyber sovereignty, or the notion that each country has the right to develop its own internet systems and management as it chooses, in contrast to the view of the United States and its partners that cyberspace should be an open, globally connected system.⁹³ Beijing’s initiatives in cyberspace governance largely focus on influencing standard-setting bodies to ensure international technical norms are favorable to its preferred authoritarian digital norms.

The PRC has increasingly pushed to drive the agendas of standards setting organizations, such as the International Organization for Standardization, the International Electrotechnical Commission, and the International Telecommunication Union. Significant representation on such bodies can allow the PRC to influence standards related to information communications technology such as satellites, artificial intelligence, and network equipment. PRC firms have drafted domestic standards for surveillance systems that automatically identify Uyghurs, for example, which could influence the development of international

standards through the advocacy of PRC representatives.⁹⁴ When standards-setting bodies hold votes, PRC companies have supported Beijing's priorities, such as when PRC telecommunications companies ostensibly serving in an independent capacity all voted together to adopt 5G standards proposed by Huawei at the 2020 Reno Conference.⁹⁵ PRC companies can thus serve as an effective mechanism to advocate for and export norms and standards to the rest of the world that reinforce Beijing's efforts to shape the global information environment to its advantage.

Capitalizing on Bilateral Relationships

Beijing seeks to use its bilateral relationships to amplify its preferred narratives and secure commitments to suppress points of view it opposes.

High-Level Summits and Agreements. The PRC uses high-level summits and agreements to reinforce its promoted narratives. For example, the PRC frequently employs high-level summits to amplify its narrative on Taiwan.⁹⁶ With close partners, the PRC sometimes uses high-level summits and agreements to secure commitments for cooperation on refuting "disinformation" – a label Beijing attaches to narratives it perceives as threatening its interests. In 2020, the PRC and Russia agreed to "jointly combat disinformation [and] offer an accurate account of facts and truth," including rejecting "rumors and slander."⁹⁷

PRC-Russia Disinformation on Ukraine

Beijing and Moscow have ratcheted up cooperation in the information space concerning Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine since February 2022. In a PRC-Russia joint statement just before the Kremlin launched its attack on Ukraine, the PRC for the first time officially opposed NATO enlargement and called on the Alliance to "respect the sovereignty, security, and interests of other countries," echoing Moscow's false narrative that NATO's expansion threatens Russian security.⁹⁸ PRC government officials and state media have since routinely amplified the Kremlin's propaganda, conspiracy theories, and disinformation about the war while officially purporting to be neutral, giving Moscow significant rhetorical cover even as Russia's forces engaged in alleged war crimes in Ukraine. In a recurring pattern, PRC state media amplify unverified or debunked claims from Russian media, which Russian outlets then cite to portray the Kremlin's views and its aggression against Ukraine as widely supported.

Examples of this dynamic include:

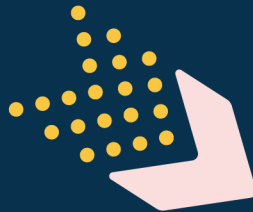
- **Beijing Amplifies Moscow's Disproven Biological Weapons Claims.** PRC communicators conducted a global campaign to amplify Moscow's false claims that Ukrainian public health facilities and laboratories that have received assistance from the United States through the U.S. Department of Defense's Cooperative Threat Reduction Program to reduce the risk of biological threats are actually "secret biological warfare facilities." Russian media used the PRC's false "bio-labs" accusations to legitimize the Kremlin's propaganda, as in a November 2022 article from the state-owned Russian news agency TASS that cited a PRC deputy UN envoy.⁹⁹
- **PRC Officials Echo Russia's Accusations that the United States is Escalating the War in Ukraine.** PRC communicators frequently repeated Russia's false claims that by providing support and aid to Kyiv, the United States is working to escalate the war in Ukraine. In turn, Russian state media cited these PRC statements as proof of an international consensus in favor of Russia's continued aggression against Ukraine.¹⁰⁰
- **Beijing Alleges that NATO Expansion Instigated the War in Ukraine.** PRC officials and state media have routinely amplified Russia's false claims that NATO enlargement is to blame for instigating the war in Ukraine and preventing peace in Europe. On August 3, 2023, after PRC Ambassador to Russia Zhang Hanhui gave an interview to TASS, Russian state media outlets quoted Zhang to claim an international consensus that NATO instigated the war.¹⁰¹
- **PRC State Media Amplify False Claims that Russia Invaded Ukraine to "Denazify" It.**¹⁰² Since the earliest days of the war, Kremlin officials and media have promoted the false narrative depicting Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a humanitarian effort to "denazify" it. Starting in May 2022, PRC state media echoed these claims to shift blame from Russia in the wake of its attack on Ukraine.¹⁰³

Russia has returned the favor by promoting PRC propaganda related to Taiwan and other PRC interests.¹⁰⁴

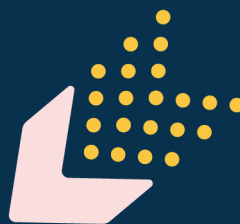
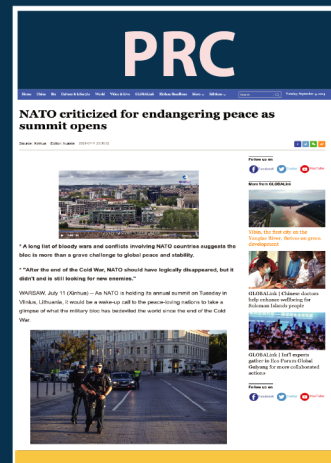
PRC Amplifies Russian Disinformation Regarding Moscow's War in Ukraine



May 2023 – Russian state media falsely claim NATO is to blame for jeopardizing peace in Europe.



July 2023 – PRC state media falsely portray NATO as endangering peace in Europe.



August 2023 – Russian state media quote PRC state media's claim that NATO is preventing peace in an attempt to validate its own false accusations.

In addition to working closely with Russia in the information space, the PRC has attempted to enlist other close partners to counter unfavorable narratives. PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Kazakh counterpart in 2020 announced they were “ready to... jointly combat disinformation.”¹⁰⁵ Since then, in August 2022 PRC and Central Asian state broadcasters held a “cooperation seminar” that discussed “combating disinformation,” among other topics, and in May 2023 the Kazakh state-run business chamber’s media channel began to broadcast weekly two 10-minute segments of content jointly produced with China Central Television that promote PRC economic development and policies.¹⁰⁶ In May 2023, state media from the PRC and five Central Asian countries agreed in Beijing to “strengthen... cooperation and promote the building of a China-Central Asia” community of common human destiny.¹⁰⁷ With Pakistan, Beijing has sought to deepen cooperation on “combating disinformation,” including under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Media Forum.¹⁰⁸ Beijing and Islamabad use the Media Forum to address what they view as propaganda and “malicious disinformation” and have launched initiatives like the “CPEC Rapid Response Information Network” and, most recently, pledged to launch the China-Pakistan Media Corridor (CPMC).¹⁰⁹

Beijing’s Vision for the China-Pakistan Media Corridor

In 2021, the PRC sought to negotiate significant control over Pakistani media as part of the China-Pakistan Media Corridor, including establishing a jointly operated “nerve center” to monitor and shape Pakistan’s information environment. The scope of the proposal – which it does not appear Islamabad seriously entertained – and the fact that the mechanisms it detailed appeared to disproportionately benefit Beijing is notable as an explicit example of Beijing’s ambition to assume direct control over a close partner’s domestic information environment. The PRC’s draft concept paper called for the PRC and Pakistan governments to establish a “nerve center” to monitor Pakistan’s information environment by streamlining inputs from think tanks, opinion leaders, CPEC study centers, media organizations, PRC companies, and even local Confucius Institutes. The proposed nerve center would have relied on “three mechanisms” and “two platforms” to carry out this mission. The mechanisms would have provided means to convert “important reports” into Urdu products to sway popular opinion; provide PRC Embassy reports directly to Pakistan’s official press release system; and monitor and respond to public criticism about the PRC. The two proposed platforms called for the creation of a joint PRC-Pakistan authoritative system for “dispelling rumors” and a newsfeed application to promote approved news to the local market.

Domestic Lobbying. In open societies, the PRC employs local proxies to speak on its behalf – a practice that Beijing prohibits within its own borders.¹¹⁰ PRC lobbying seeks to reinforce preferred public narratives. Notably, PRC government-related entities in multiple countries have sought to block the introduction of transparency requirements around lobbying.¹¹¹ This speaks to the utility of lobbying as a tool for information manipulation and more generally pursuing the PRC’s objectives within individual countries and regional groupings.

Legal Action. The PRC uses legal action in democratic societies to silence critics. PRC individuals and organizations have filed defamation suits or taken legal action against academics and journalists, or threatened to, in Canada, Australia, Czechia, and Taiwan.¹¹² For example, a PRC government-connected firm sued a Canadian scholar in Taiwan, demanding he take down an article he had written about the firm or write a new one based on information provided.¹¹³ In September 2019, Huawei’s French subsidiary filed a defamation suit, which it ultimately withdrew in July 2022, against a French researcher and the talk show that hosted her after she said that Huawei was “under the control of the State and the [CCP]” due to the presence of a CCP committee within the company.¹¹⁴ The PRC is strategic about where it undertakes legal action to quell unfavorable narratives. Beijing pursues its critics in countries where the legal system maximizes its likelihood of successfully imposing penalties, including draining the defendants’ financial resources in court battles.¹¹⁵

Conclusion

Beijing seeks to bend multilateral fora and bilateral relationships into tools for amplifying its desired narratives. At the same time, the PRC is leveraging both as vehicles for culling the international information environment of views and perspectives that challenge its own. The next section turns to the fourth element of PRC information manipulation – pairing cooptation and pressure.

ELEMENT 4:

Pairing Cooptation and Pressure

The PRC seeks to coopt external actors to shape the international information environment while using pressure to deter – and if necessary, punish – voices that contradict its promoted narratives.

Key Takeaways

- The PRC engages with prominent voices in the international information environment to shape their views and public statements in line with its desired narratives. Beijing's cooptation toolkit includes potentially corrupting engagement with political elites, granting board positions and academic appointments in return for amplification of pro-PRC narratives, sister city agreements that can impose requirements to endorse PRC policies, party-to-party interactions at the subnational level to build support for the PRC's political system, and PRC-funded trainings for foreign journalists that deemphasize investigative techniques in favor of portraying engagement with Beijing positively.
- The PRC imposes measures against corporations and individuals that challenge its narratives on issues that Beijing deems particularly sensitive, such as Taiwan and Xinjiang. Its tactics range from threats of regulatory action to denial of visas to transnational repression. Beijing's actions have a chilling effect on the willingness of foreign actors to challenge its preferred narratives.

Cooptation

Beijing systematically fosters mutually advantageous relationships with prominent foreign voices.¹¹⁶ PRC efforts at cooptation encourage adherence to Beijing's desired narratives and broadly target three sets of actors: individual political elites, subnational groups, and journalists. In this way, cooptation enables the PRC to shape the information environment to its benefit.¹¹⁷

Individual Political Elites. Beijing sometimes offers influential foreign voices – including former political leaders and retired government officials – seats on corporate boards and appointments to academic institutions. The prestige and financial benefits associated with these positions creates an incentive for political elites to affirm PRC narratives or at least self-censor.¹¹⁸ Messaging on the Belt and Road Initiative is one prominent example of how the PRC coopts political elites to shape the information environment. The board of ToJoy, a PRC-based startup accelerator that has the support of the United Front Work Department and frames its mission as complementing the Belt and Road, includes former European and Latin American national leaders.¹¹⁹ These retired politicians run ToJoy's regional divisions and have publicly reinforced PRC efforts to elevate the Belt and Road.¹²⁰ In the Balkans, the PRC government, the PRC-based Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce, and major PRC state-owned enterprises supported the establishment of the Center for Promotion and Development of BRI in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹²¹ The organization's initial leadership team drew from local elites including former Bosnian government officials.¹²²

Subnational Groups. The PRC also seeks to enlist sub-national groups to shape the information environment within specific countries. PRC subnational engagement has increased significantly as national-level engagement has become more fraught. Beijing is also often the driving force behind what is often framed by PRC interlocutors as organic or people-to-people diplomacy, at least in part due to the organization and increased centralization of the CCP. According to the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) in Berlin, as of 2021 the PRC had 146 partnerships with regional authorities in the five largest EU member states.¹²³ MERICS determined that Beijing used subnational diplomacy as a channel to reinforce its preferred narratives, for example, requiring sister cities to explicitly endorse the PRC's position on Taiwan.¹²⁴ Australian scholars have argued the PRC seeks to use subnational engagement to "challenge federal... prerogatives" in ways that create conflict between different levels of government.¹²⁵ In recent years, the PRC's effort to enlist sub-national groups has attracted increased scrutiny. Subnational groups in Europe have begun to reassess the costs of sister-city agreements and other forms of PRC engagement.¹²⁶ For example, in 2019 Prague ended its sister city relationship with Beijing due to the agreement's requirement to endorse the PRC's "One China" principle. The next year, Prague then established a sister city agreement with Taipei, causing Shanghai to retaliate by ending its own agreement with Prague.¹²⁷ In Australia, the federal government has passed legislation enhancing federal oversight of subnational governments' agreements with foreign powers, a possible model for other countries.

Another avenue by which the PRC engages with subnational groups to shape the information environment is through the CCP's work to build ties with foreign political parties. The International Liaison Department (ILD) of the CCP targets members of ruling parties around the world,¹²⁸ particularly in developing countries. According to the ILD, it maintains ties with over 600 political parties and organizations in more than 160 countries and regions.¹²⁹ Party-to-party engagements broadly aim to garner support for Beijing's approach to domestic governance and economic development.¹³⁰ As members of foreign political parties ascend to positions of national leadership, this paves the way for the PRC to use bilateral relationships to amplify its desired narratives.

Foreign Journalists. The PRC cultivates foreign journalists to shape the information environment in specific countries and globally. Beijing provides all-expense-paid opportunities for foreign journalists to visit the PRC, with options ranging from short-term exchanges to longer professional residencies and postgraduate degree programs.¹³¹ What distinguishes these from more typical journalist exchange programs is that some participants report receiving clear instructions from PRC interlocutors about how they should report both during their trips and afterward.¹³² Some participants later incorporate PRC talking points into their reporting, enabling Beijing to advance its preferred narratives without direct attribution.¹³³ The scale of Beijing's journalist training programs in Africa is particularly notable, with the PRC hosting about 1,000 African media workers each year, including about 100 for extended fellowships.¹³⁴ Even if overt PRC propaganda fails to sway audiences in Africa, the cumulative effect of reframing journalism to prioritize positive stories about the PRC over investigative reporting poses a long-term threat to journalistic integrity and good governance on the continent.¹³⁵

Pressure Against Firms and Individuals

The PRC has taken measures against corporations and individuals in situations where they are perceived to have challenged its desired narratives.¹³⁶ When directed against corporations or individuals, the PRC's tactics range from threats of regulatory action to denial of visas and transnational repression.

Corporations. In 2018, the PRC Civil Aviation Administration sent letters to major airlines ordering them to remove from their websites references to Taiwan, Macau, and Hong Kong as separate countries from the PRC, under penalty of referral to PRC cyberspace authorities.¹³⁷ 18 of 44 airlines complied and changed their descriptions of Taiwan within the 30-day time limit.¹³⁸ More recently, in 2021, Swedish apparel manufacturer H&M released a statement noting concern about reports of forced labor in Xinjiang. PRC state media outlets immediately criticized H&M. The company's sales in the PRC declined 23 percent and 41 percent year-on-year in the second and fourth quarter of 2021, even though H&M published a statement omitting Xinjiang and emphasizing the importance of the PRC to its business.¹³⁹ These instances have a larger chilling effect on the willingness of foreign corporations to take public positions that challenge Beijing's narratives.

Individuals. To shape the information environment, Beijing uses control over physical access to the PRC as a tool to deter individuals from criticizing it – and if necessary, to punish scholars, journalists, and politicians who speak out against the PRC's domestic practices and foreign policy. According to a survey of 562 China-focused scholars published in 2019, over the previous decade, nine percent reported having been warned or interviewed by PRC authorities about their research, 26 percent reported being denied access to archival research, and five percent reported problems obtaining visas.¹⁴⁰ The PRC has intimidated and expelled international reporters to target specific outlets and even arrested foreign journalists working for PRC media.¹⁴¹ For those journalists still able to access the PRC, Beijing may grant them shortened residence permits and refuse to renew their press cards, giving them only “provisional reporting rights,” according to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China.¹⁴² In 2021, the PRC issued visa bans against Members of the European Parliament and scholars affiliated with MERICS in Germany and the Alliance of Democracies Foundation in Denmark in response to EU sanctions of PRC officials complicit in human rights abuses in Xinjiang. The PRC explicitly linked these visa bans to the information environment, stating that the individuals targeted “severely harm[ed] China’s sovereignty and interests and maliciously spread lies and disinformation.”¹⁴³

Pressure against individuals includes the use of transnational repression. The PRC's transnational censorship of diaspora communities, including those in the territories of U.S. allies, appears to have increased in recent years, according to the U.S. Department of Justice and public reporting.¹⁴⁴ The PRC sometimes accuses targets of being “economic fugitives” requiring repatriation to face charges of corruption, but according to former U.S. intelligence officials, PRC authorities often use such claims to target dissidents or critics of the CCP.¹⁴⁵ Transnational repression that targets dissidents is inherently an

act of information manipulation, given that Beijing's goal is to suppress or remove critical voices from the international information environment entirely.

One prominent example of transnational repression is PRC efforts to hunt down and surveil Uyghurs living abroad. Between 1997 and 2022, Beijing initiated cyberattacks against and threatened the families of more than 5,500 overseas Uyghurs. Governments mainly across Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa detained 1,150 Uyghurs and returned 424 to the PRC, according to the Woodrow Wilson Center.¹⁴⁶ Another example of how the PRC uses transnational repression to shape the information environment is officially sanctioned student activism to intimidate critics of Beijing.¹⁴⁷ Lastly, PRC intelligence operatives operate overseas to intimidate potential critics.¹⁴⁸

Conclusion

The PRC's efforts to coopt political elites, foreign journalists, and subnational groups are paving the way for a cohort of voices beholden to Beijing. At the same time, pressure against corporations and individuals holds the potential to create gaps in the international information environment where voices go silent. The next section turns to the fifth element of PRC information manipulation – exercising control over Chinese-language media.

ELEMENT 5:

Exercising Control Over Chinese-Language Media

The PRC exerts influence over information consumed by Chinese-language speakers globally. Beijing shapes overseas Chinese-language content to amplify its preferred narratives while limiting the reach of critical voices. The PRC's appetite for interference and ability to directly impact the lives of producers and consumers of Chinese-language media around the world are much more significant and acute than its efforts targeting media in other languages.

Key Takeaways

- The PRC seeks to ensure that dominant narratives available to Chinese-language speakers globally largely support its policies and views. To this end, Beijing furnishes low-cost or free content, leverages international fora, and exploits WeChat, an application used by many Chinese-speaking communities outside the PRC. Collectively, these mechanisms create a global Chinese-language ecosystem in which Beijing's messaging resonates and disinformation gains traction.
- In parallel, the PRC seeks to suppress criticism in transnational Chinese-language spaces that are not subject to its control. Tactics that Beijing uses include financial pressure against Chinese-language outlets, the exercise of technical censorship via its control over WeChat, and harassment of individual content producers.

Shaping Overseas Chinese-Language Content

The PRC shapes Chinese-language content overseas through multiple mechanisms. Collectively, these mechanisms create a Chinese-language information environment in which Beijing's positive messaging resonates and disinformation goes unchallenged.

Furnishing Content. The CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) commands a vast media apparatus that floods overseas Chinese-language spaces with pro-Beijing rhetoric. Through the China News Service, which owns or controls prominent Chinese-language media organizations, as well as dozens of prominent official WeChat accounts active around the world, including in Western countries, UFWD pushes approved messaging to millions of followers in closed platforms.¹⁴⁹ Content generated by the CCP and PRC state media influences the larger Chinese-language media ecosystem. Many overseas Chinese-language outlets willingly amplify PRC state media reports. For example, Journal Puxin in Portugal has cited PRC state media in its reporting on topics such as Taiwan, PRC-Argentina bilateral relations, and Beijing's policies to combat climate change.¹⁵⁰ In July 2022, Journal Puxin, Netherlands-based Holland One, and Thailand-based Sing Sian Yer Pao Daily echoed PRC propaganda celebrating the 25th anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong from the UK to the PRC, accused the United States of provoking a space arms race, and praised the PRC for hosting a recent BRICS summit.¹⁵¹ The sheer volume of official PRC content flooding the international Chinese-speaking environment enables pro-Beijing narratives to inform reporting that the PRC does not

directly control. Nominally independent Chinese-language journalism widely uses PRC state media content simply because it is so available and affordable. For example, according to a Financial Times investigation, in 2017, over 200 overseas Chinese-language outlets reprinted or broadcast PRC and CCP media content.¹⁵²

International Fora. Beijing convenes international fora to strengthen coordination with international Chinese-language media in a bid to position the PRC as the central focal point for messaging guidance. The UFWD-controlled China News Service established the Global Chinese Language Media Forum and the Global Chinese Media Cooperation Union (GCMCU) in 2009 to provide venues for imparting CCP guidance directly to leaders in Chinese-language media outside the PRC.¹⁵³ GCLMF has consolidated its influence as an official venue for liaising with global Chinese-language media outlets. The forum has expanded from 150 participants representing 130 outlets in 30 countries in 2001 to 460 participants representing 430 outlets in 64 countries in 2019.¹⁵⁴ China News Service vice president and deputy editor-in-chief Xia Chunping has called GCLMF the “spiritual home” of global Chinese media.¹⁵⁵ At the 2019 forum, a senior PRC official told delegates that it was their “duty and mission to retransmit” PRC state media content.¹⁵⁶ GCLMF has also served as a venue for formalizing strategic cooperation agreements between China News Service or PRC state media groups and overseas Chinese-language media.¹⁵⁷

WeChat: The Super-Bubble

WeChat’s common use in many Chinese-speaking communities around the world makes it a critical mechanism for amplifying Beijing-approved narratives and discrediting or silencing critics. The ubiquity of this app underpins the PRC’s ability to combine the amplification of approved narratives and suppression of critical voices to create a self-contained information environment. Depending on whether a user’s account is registered to a PRC phone number or a non-PRC phone number, it is tied to WeiXin or WeChat, respectively, with different degrees of influence by Beijing as a result.¹⁵⁸ WeiXin and WeChat are both in use outside the PRC and are interoperable, but WeiXin is more integrated with everyday life and is subject to a greater degree of PRC control. Both have “public” accounts, or verified profiles that can disseminate news to their followers, but the requirement for WeiXin public accounts to be registered to PRC persons gives the PRC government direct influence over the messaging such accounts propagate in the international information environment. For example, in 2021, 86 percent of Chinese speakers in Australia, where WeChat has an estimated 690,000 daily active users, said that they often or sometimes get their Chinese- or English-language news directly from WeChat, though only about half trust news from official WeChat accounts somewhat or a lot.¹⁵⁹ In 2022, 75 percent of respondents said they often or somewhat get their news from WeChat.¹⁶⁰

Exploiting WeChat. The PRC has used WeChat as a channel for disseminating disinformation targeting Chinese-language speakers residing in democracies. For example, Global Affairs Canada's Rapid Response Mechanism detected a disinformation campaign on WeChat which targeted Michael Chong, a Canadian Member of Parliament, ahead of June 2023 by-elections. Ottawa found that the network involved in this operation, which included known PRC state media-linked accounts and accounts likely linked to the PRC state apparatus in opaque ways, shared and amplified false and misleading information about Mr. Chong's identity, background, and political views.¹⁶¹ Similarly, during Australia's 2019 and 2022 federal election campaigns, WeChat groups were rife with false claims about political candidates and parties and other political content that appeared to breach WeChat's own terms of use.¹⁶²

WeChat's widespread use in Chinese-speaking diaspora communities makes it a conduit for disinformation that the PRC uses to try to undermine solidarity in pluralistic democracies. Separate teams of researchers found independently in 2022 that PRC government-linked accounts on WeChat and Weixin use language highlighting racism and violence in other countries at much higher rates than non-PRC-government affiliated accounts, seeking to portray these issues as specifically targeting diaspora communities.¹⁶³ Research by political scientists suggests that official PRC accounts attempt to use these wedge narratives, especially ahead of national elections, to "isolate the diaspora from host societies, increase loyalty to [the PRC], and decrease the legitimacy of democratic systems in the eyes of the diaspora."¹⁶⁴

Suppressing Critical Perspectives

While the PRC shapes overseas Chinese-language content, it works in parallel to suppress criticism. Tactics that Beijing uses include financial pressure against Chinese-language outlets, technical censorship, and harassment of individual content producers.

Financial Pressure. Beijing wields considerable financial leverage over Chinese-language media. This leverage stems from the risk of boycotts and backlash from patriotic pro-PRC readers, whether organic or encouraged by Beijing, and from the ability of local pro-Beijing groups to withhold advertising revenue from outlets that criticize the PRC.¹⁶⁵ Chinese-language media outside the PRC consequently have an incentive to self-censor, even if they are not inclined to proactively support Beijing's preferred narratives. For example, the significant Chinese-language media market in Australia, which about three quarters of Chinese Australians consume online and more than half read in print form, is vulnerable to pressure from the PRC.¹⁶⁶ According to 2021 research by the Lowy Institute, Australian Chinese-language media are more likely to support Canberra's policies than Beijing's when reporting on bilateral tensions, but they self-censor and tend to soften criticism of the PRC to avoid retaliation.¹⁶⁷ Critical coverage of the PRC may result in loss of access to the PRC market.¹⁶⁸ The PRC has in some cases explicitly threatened or attempted to cut critical media off from its market as a form of economic retaliation. In 2016, the Sydney Morning Herald reported that a PRC official from Zhejiang Province instructed local companies to withdraw advertising contracts from an independent Chinese-language publication in Australia after seeing their ads in it.¹⁶⁹ WeChat's role as a primary means for Chinese-language news consumption outside the PRC has the effect of suppressing local

appetite for other news sources, often preventing independent or publicly funded alternative news sources from gaining market share.

Technical Censorship. WeChat and WeiXin's popularity among Chinese speakers globally enables the PRC to censor overseas discussions. CitizenLab at the University of Toronto found that communications between registered WeChat users outside the PRC feed through "pervasive" surveillance that directly improves the PRC's domestic censorship capabilities by teaching WeiXin to recognize sensitive content more quickly.¹⁷⁰ Within the closed WeChat ecosystem, PRC-based censors replicate the information controls that Beijing has imposed at home. According to Freedom House, PRC censors deleted a WeChat post by a Canadian Member of Parliament praising Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, which advocated for increased autonomy for the special administrative region, and blocked coverage of corruption among PRC officials.¹⁷¹ The information environment that WeChat users experience can differ significantly from that of non-Chinese-language media. For example, a 2018 study found that the three most prominent Chinese-language public WeChat accounts in Australia paid a fraction of the attention to domestic PRC politics that Australia's publicly funded Special Broadcast Service did.¹⁷²

Harassment. Another tactic Beijing uses to silence criticism in overseas Chinese-language media is harassment. Negative coverage can result in threats to PRC-based family members or staff.¹⁷³ Contradicting Beijing's desired narratives can also result in economic harassment. The PRC's ability to cut off users from WeChat or WeiXin, the app of choice for many Chinese-speakers around the world, holds the potential to deny them both a mode of communication as well as a platform for banking and other commercial services that are necessary in the PRC.¹⁷⁴ For everyday users of WeiXin, the risks of running afoul of PRC censors are especially clear, and PRC authorities continue to censor PRC-registered accounts even if they travel overseas or switch their accounts to non-PRC numbers.¹⁷⁵ In 2022, the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence assessed that the risk of being blocked or harassed by PRC authorities contributes to self-censorship among WeiXin users due to the major life disruptions that being cut off from the services often tied to these accounts could cause.¹⁷⁶ The threat of official retaliation can have a chilling effect, inducing self-censorship. In 2020, an unnamed editor of one of Australia's largest public WeChat accounts admitted that she avoided crossing "political red lines" and hewed to the coverage of CCP mouthpiece People's Daily and PRC-run Xinhua for messaging guideposts.¹⁷⁷

Conclusion

Through furnishing low-cost or free content, leveraging international fora, and exploiting WeChat, Beijing is shaping Chinese-language content consumed overseas. In parallel, Beijing seeks to suppress critical voices in Chinese-language spaces. The PRC's success in exercising control over Chinese-language media is a cautionary harbinger of how its larger efforts could ultimately reshape the global information environment.

CONCLUSION

Beijing's efforts to influence the global information environment – underwritten by billions of dollars in investments – advance its desired narratives while suppressing critical voices. The PRC's information manipulation centers on five key elements: leveraging propaganda and censorship, promoting digital authoritarianism, exploiting international organizations and bilateral relationships, pairing cooptation and pressure, and exercising control over Chinese-language media. Collectively, these elements erode the integrity of the information environment.¹⁷⁸

Historically, disinformation has played a supporting role in PRC information manipulation. However, recent PRC campaigns demonstrate Beijing's growing use of disinformation, including with respect to issues that extend well beyond the PRC's domestic governance and territorial claims. In fact, recent campaigns have addressed issues ranging from COVID-19 to the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) partnership to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹⁷⁹

Collectively, the tactics and techniques illuminated in this report hold the potential to reshape the global information environment. If successful, the PRC's information manipulation would in many parts of the world diminish freedom to express views critical of Beijing. The PRC's activities would undermine confidence in the objectivity of information sources, and increasingly bend multilateral fora and bilateral relationships into tools for amplifying its preferred narratives. Beijing would develop a surgical capability to shape the information particular groups and even individuals consume. And the international information landscape would feature significant gaps and inherent pro-PRC biases. In this possible future, the information available to publics, media, civil society, academia, and governments as they engage with the PRC would be distorted. This would directly challenge all nations that seek to predicate their relations with the PRC on fact-based assessments of their sovereign interests.

This future is not a foregone conclusion. When targeting democratic countries, Beijing's information manipulation efforts have encountered major setbacks, often due to pushback from local media and civil society.¹⁸⁰ There is growing consensus on the need to counter the PRC's problematic behavior in the information space. A broad range of countries have expressed growing concern about the PRC's continued amplification of pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation on Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. The stakes are high: if the PRC's global narratives ultimately prevail, it will encounter less resistance to reshaping the international order to the detriment of individual liberties and national sovereignty around the world.

SPECIAL TOPIC 1:

How the PRC Launders Official Commentary to Promote Friendly Narratives

According to U.S. Government information, PRC officials sometimes produce English-language articles attributed to authors without discernable links to the PRC Government and disseminate them via local media outlets in various regions. PRC officials sometimes attribute relevant content to specific authors under false names, likely to conceal the PRC's role in producing it and falsely purporting to represent legitimate, organic sentiment in a given region. In addition, PRC officials are known in some cases to attribute such manufactured commentaries to "international affairs commentators" and then use other individual, non-official accounts to promote these commentaries. As one example, the PRC MFA uses a manufactured persona named Yi Fan, often credited as a "Beijing-based international affairs commentator," to deceptively promote pro-Beijing views on a wide variety of topics and regions. The PRC MFA uses this manufactured persona, and likely others like it, to collaboratively author articles seeking to influence local information environments around the world in the PRC's favor. These manufactured personae distort foreign information environments by laundering CCP propaganda narratives through local media outlets to influence foreign audiences at a granular level, which degrades the integrity of information spaces globally.

Initially Yi Fan was attributed as a PRC MFA analyst in 2015 and then as a correspondent in important PRC- and CCP-owned media, but the PRC soon began obscuring government ties in favor of presenting the persona as an independent analyst. As recently as August 2023, articles on PRC foreign policy with Yi Fan's byline have appeared widely in foreign publications in campaigns seemingly coordinated with local PRC embassies to maximize their impact in key regions spanning Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America.¹⁸¹ For example, media in the Seychelles, Tanzania, and Nigeria, as well as the PRC embassies in Sao Tome and Principe and Ghana, published a January 2021 article credited to Yi trumpeting close ties between Africa and the PRC.¹⁸² In May 2021, an article on PRC-Africa COVID cooperation appeared in an Ethiopian outlet which multiple Rwandan and Tanzanian outlets then reposted.¹⁸³ In October 2021, after People's Daily published an article attributed to Yi praising the PRC's approach to environmental sustainability, the PRC Embassy in Uganda, a Rwandan outlet, and Ghanaian state media reposted it.¹⁸⁴ In each of these cases, the articles received broad access to influential regional publications, including PRC and regional state media, again indicating PRC support for disseminating this messaging broadly.

An article attributed to the Yi Fan persona openly stated that all this targeted propaganda is specifically intended to help Beijing turn the tide in a critical battle in the international information environment. Writing in the Singapore-based Straits Times in February 2021, the Yi persona argued the PRC must overcome a "distorted narrative of its actions and intentions" spread by malicious and biased Western countries.¹⁸⁵ To close the "perception gap," it argued, Beijing must embark on a "new Long March"¹⁸⁶ to help foreign countries understand the PRC's unique situation and the CCP's "colossal task" of governing it.¹⁸⁷ The Yi persona's arguments closely align with CCP narratives across a wide range of topics globally, seeking to portray Beijing as a responsible actor and major power.¹⁸⁸

Timeline Of Yi Fan Articles



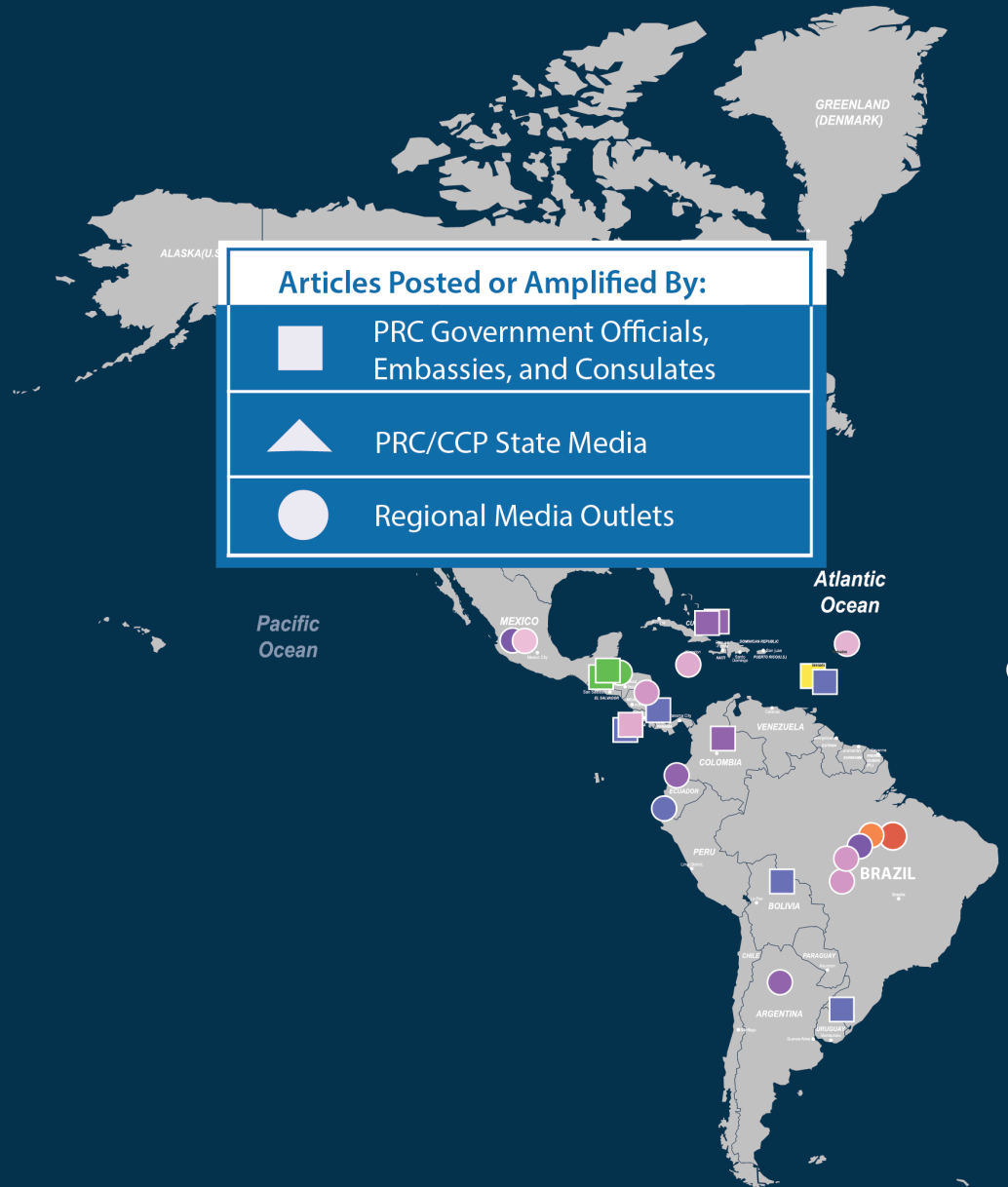
Sep 2015
 Sep 2016
 Aug 2017
 Apr 2018
 July 2018
 May 2020
 June 2020
 Sep 2020
 Dec 2020
 Jan 2021
 Feb 2021
 Mar 2021
 Apr 2021
 May 2021
 June 2021
 July 2021
 Sep 2021
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 Nov 2021
 Dec 2021
 May 2022
 June 2022
 Aug 2022
 Sep 2022
 Nov 2022
 Dec 2022
 Mar 2023
 Apr 2023
 May 2023
 Jun 2023
 Jul 2023
 Aug 2023

Articles Posted or Amplified By:

■ PRC Government Officials, Embassies, and Consulates

▲ PRC/CCP State Media

● Regional Media Outlets





SPECIAL TOPIC 2:

How PRC State-Owned Enterprises Serve Beijing's Messaging Needs

The PRC government leverages PRC state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and local media in other countries to disseminate narratives favorable to Beijing, blending commercial advertising with political propaganda. SOE engagement in sub-Saharan Africa provides an illustrative example of how these efforts work in tandem to portray the PRC as a supportive economic partner while drowning out criticism. Under Beijing's direction and in line with top-level CCP propaganda guidance, PRC SOEs use their commercial operations to shape the PRC's international image and advocate for Beijing's priorities. At the same time, PRC officials draw attention to the activities of these SOEs, portraying them as efficient, sophisticated, and world-class service providers. This tactic provides the PRC with a separate cadre of Beijing-directed, pro-CCP communicators to shape perceptions of the PRC's strategic objectives abroad.

The CCP has issued high-level guidance to SOEs to actively carry out propaganda work on Beijing's behalf, making clear that their activities should serve and be coordinated with official messaging needs. In 2010, CCP Central Propaganda Department Director Liu Yunshan and CCP Central Committee Foreign Propaganda Office Director Wang Chen directed SOEs to use their overseas activities to build an "honest, trustworthy, cooperative, and friendly" image of Beijing.¹⁸⁹ The 2013 launch of BRI, combined with high-level efforts under President Xi to expand PRC state media's overseas activities, provided further impetus for SOE involvement in propaganda work targeting foreign countries.¹⁹⁰ At the 2020 Chinese Enterprise Image Summit Forum, the Party secretary of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), the PRC State Council body that oversees SOEs, directed SOEs to demonstrate "the image of a peacefully developing [PRC]"; adhere to the Party's values and advocate for the community of common human destiny; expand their international influence by improving their communications capabilities; and promote cultural integration while securing support for development of BRI.¹⁹¹

Pursuant to high-level guidance from Beijing for SOEs to actively carry out official propaganda work, PRC officials directly coordinate such work with SOEs' in-country activities. For example, as of late 2021, PRC officials in East Africa directed members of a group representing PRC companies operating in that region to use social media to promote the positive impact of PRC-East African friendship and cooperation on the lives of citizens, in addition to nominal marketing activity. PRC officials directed SOE employees to create new social media accounts on various platforms to engage with media in the East African country and users of these platforms and to submit reports quantifying their promotional activities. PRC officials also requested that the relevant companies semiannually submit examples of their positive contributions that could then be passed onto to host government officials for amplification in local television and radio broadcasts.

SPECIAL TOPIC 3:

How the United Front System Carries Out Transnational Repression

The United Front system leverages a multitude of overt and deniable entities to coopt advocates and marginalize critics of Beijing, with UFWD under the CCP Central Committee coordinating most of these activities. President Xi has argued that United Front work is critical for maintaining and increasing Beijing's power.¹⁹² Since coming to power in 2012, he has significantly increased funding for the UFWD and elevated central coordination of its efforts to shape the international environment – including the information domain – to Beijing's advantage. A key priority for the UFWD is to pressure diverse Chinese diaspora communities to approve of the PRC's policies and narratives, or at minimum refrain from organizing against them.¹⁹³

Some UFWD entities are not widely known as associated with United Front work and seek to influence global discourse under the guise of an independent organization. For example, the CCP promotes its official narratives on Xinjiang through the activities of the Islamic Association of China (IAC), which is under the supervision of the UFWD's State Administration for Religious Affairs.¹⁹⁴ As a “mass religious organization” of the “patriotic United Front,” the IAC plays a crucial role in the “Sinicization of Islam,” part of the CCP's effort to bring all religious doctrine and practice within the PRC in line with CCP doctrine such that religions conform to and bolster CCP ideology and promotes loyalty to the CCP and the state.¹⁹⁵ IAC's statements rejecting criticism of the PRC's infringement on religious freedom provide content that PRC state media and diplomats amplify externally, portraying it as a credible, independent voice.¹⁹⁶ The IAC engages with other international Islamic institutions through academic conferences and official meetings to build support for its policies especially among officials in influential Muslim-majority countries.¹⁹⁷ Experts have found that the IAC has played a key role in arranging visits with foreign Muslim scholars and officials following various crises in the PRC and argue that the IAC has helped the PRC penetrate “high levels of Muslim Arab leadership and Islamic Institutions and contributed to the region's muted stance on Xinjiang.”¹⁹⁸

The UFWD operates at times in collaboration with the PRC's civilian counterintelligence and secret police agency, the Ministry of State Security (MSS), which uses United Front work for operational cover and has a leading role in orchestrating CCP influence operations.¹⁹⁹ The MSS seeks to operationally leverage UFWD-affiliated individuals and organizations as cover to interact with members of Chinese diaspora communities and ultimately attempt to coopt them or gain access to their expertise. MSS bureaus also assist directly with propaganda work, such as when the CCP's Central Propaganda Department tasked provincial-level State Security Department agents to produce advertising for an artistic performance ahead of President Xi's 2019 visit to Athens and to recruit Greek political VIPs and Chinese diaspora figures to attend the event.

The MSS “executes the Chinese government's efforts to limit free speech, attack dissidents, and preserve the power of the Communist Party,” according to a senior Federal Bureau of Investigation counterintelligence official.²⁰⁰ The MSS and UFWD have been observed collaborating at various levels both within the PRC and overseas to suppress and threaten critics of Beijing, indicating that UFWD is broadly

involved in various forms of coercion by the PRC security and intelligence apparatus. In 2019 and 2020, the secretaries to MSS and UFWD officials met repeatedly in Shenzhen and Hong Kong around events concerning anti-PRC government protests in Hong Kong, suggesting cooperation occurs at the highest levels during crises. At the grassroots level, MSS agents liaise with United Front-affiliated individuals to prevent opponents of the PRC from engaging in acts of criticism such as interfering with state visits by PRC officials.

Abroad, United Front-associated entities collaborate with PRC Embassies to cultivate a political and information environment conducive to Beijing's interests. For example, according to information available to a Western government, as of 2021 Chinese diaspora groups in a Western European country were consulting with the PRC Embassy in the Western European country to identify and approach ethnic Chinese candidates for elected office, to include the PRC Embassy recommending specific prospective candidates by name.

In some cases, PRC authorities have been known to specifically direct assets to engage in propaganda activities directed against Beijing in order to conceal their covert relationships with security or intelligence services. For example, in October 2022, according to U.S. Government information, a provincial PRC State Security Department directed a foreign asset based in Macau to avoid conveying an overtly pro-Beijing stance and to publicly criticize and make complaints against the PRC.

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