



Risk Mitigation Consulting Inc.

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WHITE PAPER SERIES

Chinese Influence Operations
Within the United States

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INTENT

This white paper is designed to provide analysis of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events/trends and their potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be an all-encompassing assessment of the subject.



Chinese Influence Operations Within the United States

Introduction

China executes influence operations against the United States utilizing several methods, namely social media and traditional media tactics. Chinese influence operations have targeted a number of controversial topics within domestic U.S. politics, including the 2020 presidential election, the COVID-19 pandemic, and social justice issues. This White Paper will provide an overview of how and why China carries out disinformation and misinformation campaigns against the United States.

Chinese Influence Operations Goals/Background

China seeks to expand its influence on the world stage by improving foreign relations and establishing themselves as a new global superpower. They intend to replace the United States as the dominant international player by establishing dominance in trade sectors to grow their economy and gain leverage in foreign relations.¹ They plan to achieve this by damaging the international image of the United States and sowing discord internally among its population. Additionally, China has invested heavily in publishing pro-China media.² In doing so, China hopes to reduce the United States' credibility and favorability among other nations, enabling China to appear to be the dominant economic and military power by comparison.

Chinese Influence Operations Tactics/Techniques

China has undertaken a series of large-scale influence operations recently, utilizing networks including both social media and traditional media to spread state-created content. In the world's current state, media enables content to travel quickly and directly into the homes of people around the globe. China has taken advantage of this to expose the general population to their message. China aims to become the world's primary trade partner and replace the United States as the foremost military and economic power¹; the content they spread is based on this goal. Chinese-created content for their influence operations generally promotes China in a positive light based on the country's natural beauty, contributions to global advancements in areas such as sports and technology, and general promotions of the country's cultural aspects and traditions. In addition, China also mass-produces content that portrays the United States in a negative light in comparison to China, such as material concerning the killing of George Floyd, COVID-19, and other divisive and political topics.² With this combination of tactics and techniques, Chinese influence operations unduly threaten the international image of the United States and have the potential to cause civil unrest domestically. This elevates these influence operations to a national security threat to the United States.

Social Media

China employs several tactics via social media to carry out influence operations. Among these tactics are content farms and the creation of hundreds of thousands of fake social media accounts on popular websites.³ Content farms are utilized to create the material, for example, articles or infographics, and fake social media accounts that are used to disseminate the material to the general



population. The use of features such as Instagram “stories” and Twitter’s “retweet” button make spreading the material quickly and effectively extremely easy. For example, an observed tactic has been using paid Instagram ads in order to spread content that is pro-China.² Instagram ads appear in user’s “home feed”, meaning the list of recent posts of users they follow. These ads show up in home feeds even if the user does not follow the original account, so the ad blends in with their familiar accounts, legitimizing the information within and exposing them to it when they may not have been otherwise. Furthermore, Instagram uses algorithms in order to select which users see which ads, so users that recently looked up Chinese-related material are more likely to see the ad². This means that the selected users to view the ad may be more likely to believe the ad due to confirmation bias as a result of their search history. Several techniques are utilized when creating and sharing the content, such as inflammatory headlines and material that caters to people’s biases. Techniques such as these enable the content to jump from being exclusively spread through the network of fake Chinese-created accounts to the general population’s accounts, letting the content gain traction as more and more people share it. When people see the content being shared by those who they know, they implicitly lean towards trusting the content more than if it was shared by someone they did not know.

Traditional Media

China operates traditional media sources that execute influence operations within the United States. The Chinese government has a direct mouthpiece through these news entities that enable the spread of the type of information that they want to spread without the distortion that may result from a free press. For example, the People’s Daily is a Chinese state-controlled newspaper that operates within the United States.⁴ Due to free speech laws within the United States, China may legally spread their information as they please. However, the FARA act requires that these news sources disclose certain information such as related activities and finances that make public their relationship with China.⁵ As a result of the FARA act, Xinhua, a Chinese state-run news service that operates within the U.S., disclosed financial information that revealed their spending increased 500% since 2016.⁶ Data from FARA registrations by Chinese news agencies shows that China spent more than any other country on traditional media activities in the U.S. in 2020.⁶ Although the FARA act renders the influence operations in traditional media overt rather than covert, the operations still have a significant effect due to various human errors, such as bias towards appealing messages and trusting false signals of credibility such as an appearance of objectivity. This enables the Chinese government to spread content directly created by them through major media outlets to U.S. citizens who are likely susceptible to believing the message within the content.

Case Studies

2020 U.S. Presidential Election

In the past, China has attempted to influence foreign elections through influence operations in order to influence the outcome of the election or undermine democratic processes in the targeted country.⁷ During the 2020 U.S. election, Chinese-controlled social media accounts spread misinformation and disinformation which increased political tensions and undermined trust in the U.S. political system, both domestic and abroad. Official channels, such as state-controlled media organizations, also mocked the 2020 election. The United States has a political climate that has



become deeply divided among party lines which leaves it extremely vulnerable to malignant parties that seek to undermine it and cause political mayhem. China sought to play a part in the U.S. election not by favoring one candidate but by discrediting both and spreading pro-China propaganda.⁸ China also played along political alliances during the election process, using fake social media accounts to spread messages supporting or denouncing both left-wing and right-wing organizations such as Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter.⁹ Social media has evolved over the last few years into a vehicle that can spread all types of information extremely quickly through users who sometimes do not vet the contents thoroughly, by way of features such as the Instagram “stories” and “hashtags”. These became highways for Chinese propaganda and disinformation that sought to discredit presidential candidates and boost the image of China.

China differs from Russia with respect to the election-focused influence operations campaigns in that the material China posts does not exclusively attack or favor one singular candidate.⁷ Since China seeks to promote itself as a peaceful and benign world power that does not meddle in the domestic politics of another country, the risks of an aggressive influence campaign similar to Russia’s 2016 influence campaign were judged to outweigh the potential benefits since both candidates had similar foreign policy outlooks towards China. Rather, China sought to discredit the election process as a whole and undermine the voting system through influence campaigns. For example, Chinese state media has criticized the U.S. election as “chaotic and costly”.¹⁰

China has shown through social media and official channels that they are willing to engage the U.S. population on controversial topics such as election fraud during the 2020 presidential election. Through statements and Twitter posts, China has criticized the democratic process used for U.S. elections. On Twitter, the Chinese embassy briefly posted that Democrats had cheated in the election and that the result should be overturned. After a few hours, the tweet was deleted.¹¹ Additionally, the People’s Daily posted a tweet mocking former President Trump with a laughing emoji for claiming that he had won the presidential election.⁸ Although both tweets were deleted, they still show a willingness by China to engage and publicly deprecate the 2020 presidential election process. Each tweet favored a different party, highlighting the Chinese motive of casting doubt upon democratic electoral processes and heightening divisiveness rather than supporting one political group or individual.

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 Pandemic turned into the primary focus for many nations over the course of the last year and a half as their country’s death tolls rose and the other major effects of the pandemic took place. Among the hot topics related to the pandemic are the various responses of different countries and the origins of the virus. China has undertaken an information warfare campaign via social media and its state-run media outlets in order to shift public opinion favorably towards China and dispute many facts about the pandemic.¹² Although Wuhan, China is widely understood to be ground zero of the pandemic, China’s image has shifted positively in many nations as a result of the information they are spreading.¹³



For example, China has openly mocked the U.S. response to the virus as the U.S. stumbled in effectively managing and counteracting the virus.¹⁴ Due to differences in government systems, such as China being an authoritarian regime and the U.S. a democracy that prides itself on individual freedom, China has had more tools at its disposal when it came to lockdowns and other responses. The differences in the powers of the government regarding control of their respective populations create an advantageous international environment for China to make the U.S. appear unprepared and weak in their virus response in comparison to China.

The Chinese embassy in France posted a video on Twitter mocking the U.S. response to COVID-19 called “Once Upon a Virus”. The video is in English and creates the perception that the United States was downplaying the virus and effective measures to combat the virus such as quarantines and wearing a facemask.¹¹ The short cartoon depicts China as the responsible world power that understands the risks of the virus while the United States is irresponsible with managing the virus and pays for it with their citizen’s lives. Chinese tactics in comparing the U.S. and China on specific topics in order to undermine the U.S. are plainly shown in this video, as there is a side-by-side view of the Statue of Liberty and Chinese health care workers.

The origins of the pandemic have always been heavily debated, but new information has recently come out about Chinese researchers in the Wuhan Institute of Virology becoming sick well before the virus spread globally.¹⁵ According to U.S. intelligence agencies, the “lab-leak theory” is now at least as plausible as the natural origins theory.¹⁶ Although information confirming how COVID-19 originated is not available, China has attempted to steer the conversation towards blaming the pandemic on the U.S. by calling it a “bioweapon” and distorting the facts about the origins of the virus. China has gone so far as to suggest the virus emerged directly from the United States military.¹⁷ Additionally, China has publicly criticized Dr. Fauci for questioning the “natural origins theory” and denounced his motives as joining an “opinion war against China”.¹⁸ These information tactics are in line with other strategies that attempt to publicly compare the United States and China, often with distorted or untrue information.

Social Justice Issues

Recently on the international stage, China has faced recent condemnation for its police crackdowns on the Hong Kong protests and concentration camps for Uyghur Muslims. Social justice issues exploding in the United States provided the perfect opportunity for China to exploit reactions to events such as the killing of George Floyd. Exploiting these opportunities shifts the conversation away from what China is doing domestically to the problems that the United States faces. Similar to how China attempted to sway the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests¹⁹, China launched an influence operation to take advantage of the protests within the United States Using popular social media platforms such as Twitter, China has broadcasted information demonizing the U.S. with the goal of undermining trust in the U.S. government and creating discontent among the population. This creates a negative international image of the U.S. and allows China to capitalize on political conflict by appearing as the better alternative.



An editorial in People's Daily newspaper depicted the unrest in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd as American hypocrisy, since the United States was simultaneously threatening to impose sanctions on China during the Hong Kong protests due to Chinese police crackdowns on protestors.²⁰ Videos of violent interactions between police officers and civilians in the United States were being heavily circulated, and the People's Daily sought to highlight these violent interactions by way of accusing the United States of hypocrisy. Comparisons between events within the United States and events within China such as the George Floyd Protests and the Hong Kong protests are common, as China seeks to undermine the image of the United States while simultaneously promoting theirs. The People's Daily newspaper falls under the "traditional media" category since the People's Daily Overseas Edition is registered under the FARA act as a foreign agent.⁴

Hua Chunying, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, tweeted the reply, "I can't breathe", to a tweet from State Department Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus about the Hong Kong protests on Twitter²¹. Publicly embracing social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter depicts China in a positive light to those who support these social justice movements. China seeks to appear as an ally to the supporters of these social justice initiatives to improve their image and popularity within the United States. This is in line with their other influence operations which seek to promote themselves while denigrating the United States, particularly to U.S. citizens.

The People's Daily published a cartoon of a crumbling Statue of Liberty atop the White House covered in blood and tear gas in a show of support for the Black Lives Matter movement.²² During the protests that occurred across America following the death of George Floyd, many protestors and those who aligned themselves with the social justice movements, were questioning the foundations of the United States. Those who adhere to this line of thought could potentially view the cartoon as a confirmation of these ideas, since the crumbling White House represents the symbolic deterioration of American values and core components of the government. Additionally, those who are not citizens of the United States may see the cartoon as a sign that the United States as a whole is facing an overall decline and that the country is not what it used to be.

Conclusion

Chinese influence operations pose a significant threat to the United States. Controversial topics such as COVID-19, social justice issues, and the 2020 election provide opportunities for China to disseminate information that exacerbates social and political tensions within the United States. Pro-China content published by Chinese news sources and social media accounts attempt to simultaneously give China the appearance of a put-together and powerful world power by comparison. New and emerging technologies that enable the immediate sharing of information and the popularity of social and traditional media serve as enablers for these complex influence operations. As China pursues economic and military ambitions such as the Belt & Road Initiative²³, influence operations within the United States will continue to benefit their mission and be a core component of their overall strategy to become the world's foremost international power.



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