



"Russia is a spell of bad weather, China is changing the climate"\*

The Chinese Communist Party's  
Global Hybrid Warfare Operations

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# Strategic objectives

Since Xi Jinping became president in 2012, the CCP has become increasingly assertive on the world stage, openly contemptuous of norms and more vocal of its view that its system is superior to the current Western led order. China also has a long history of deception in warfare; being one of the recurring themes of Tsun Tzu's Art of War and in bringing the CCP to power through guerrilla tactics. Through Hybrid Warfare (HW), China seeks to achieve four strategic objectives:

## I. Maintain CCP rule in China

- The CCP views itself as the bulwark against foreign imperialism; the only thing keeping China from sliding back into anarchy, weakness and humiliation. Therefore, maintaining the CCP's rule is paramount.
- To this end the regime employs sophisticated political warfare operations to suppress domestic dissent and reinforce Party loyalty at home and abroad as well as to undermine China's international rivals.

## II. Restore China's rightful place as a preeminent regional power and the centre of the World

- The regime has propagated a powerful narrative that emphasises the leadership's determination to overcome the "century of China's humiliation" (a period in the 19th century when China lost successive conflicts to western powers and was forced to enter disadvantageous treaties).
- China aims to reverse this and reorientate the world back to its "natural state" where the East was the centre of power, commerce and innovation.
  - A particular priority for Beijing is to dominate the geographic approaches to China, which it has redefined over the last two decades to include most of the Western Pacific, Australia and New Zealand, much of the Indian Ocean, and most of Central Asia.
- The official timeline to restore the nation's power, wealth, and influence, is 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic.

## III. Export the CCP's model of rule as a superior alternative to the western model.

- In his address to the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, Xi Jinping argued that the Chinese regime's approach to governance and development was a far more attractive option to that offered by the liberal democracies of the West:

"[China has] blazed a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernisation. It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence."

- According to H.R. McMaster (fmr US Defence Sec) part of China's vision is the fostering of a growing group of like-minded revisionist countries that, over time, may constitute an international partnership, alliance, or even a China-centred empire.

# Strategic objectives

## **IV. Establish China as militarily and economically equal – if not superior – to the United States.**

- Currently China sees a conventional conflict the US and its allies as an unacceptable risk.
- Hybrid operations provide an asymmetric alternative that negate US advantages, pushing it and its allies from their predominant role in the Western Pacific and Eastern Indian Ocean.
- At the same time the CCP is building strategic strength in non-aligned parts of Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America to undermine US international strength.

# Methodology

## 1) Data gathering for data-driven operations

- Operations are fuelled by mass intelligence gathering efforts by state security, contracted companies and artificial intelligence.
- Nodes gather data to create profiles on prominent individuals and associates through OSINT (social media and news stories) and illegally obtained records (bank details, medical records etc) on the dark web.
- These efforts have been described as “Cambridge Analytica on steroids” by an Australian Intelligence Analyst.
- Assisted by the export of surveillance technologies, which feed intelligence back to China as well as the buyers.

## 2) Infiltration of educational institutes

- China has embarked on a global campaign of establishing Confucius Institutes. There are now 440 across the world.
- These institutes promote pro-China messaging and encourage self-censorship of taboo subjects like Tiananmen square, Hong Kong, the Uyghurs and human rights abuses.
- Also act as ‘talent spotters’ for students who are potentially sympathetic to China or can be cultivated into prominent messengers.

## 3) Training foreign journalists

- China uses top journalism schools to offer sponsored courses to experienced journalists from developing countries a chance to expand their knowledge and training, particularly based around digital and online journalism
- These training courses come heavily laced with pro-CCP messaging and propaganda which they expect the journalists to take back and promote when reporting in their home country
- The huge expansion of CCTV International, now CGTN, and Xinhua over the last decade, the latter doubling its overseas bureaus to some 200 in ten years, has led to these new foreign bureaus offering lucrative salaries to editors, journalists and technicians, leading to a domestic drain on talent.
- China is increasingly investing in foreign local independent media. Reportedly one of the fastest growing and most influential digital TV media networks in Africa is run by the StarTimes Group, which is a privately owned Chinese media organisation.

# Methodology

## 4) Wolf warrior diplomacy

- The act of aggressively promoting China and the CCP message across certain Geographies using twitter accounts of diplomats and embassies with a combination of engagement, misinformation and disinformation.
- This is met with limited response or alternative by Western accounts, leaving the CCP with a free reign to spread their influence.

## 5) Economic investment and financial support

The size of China's economy makes this a significant weapon in China's hybrid arsenal compared to other hybrid actors; convincing businessmen and governments to self-censor in exchange for lucrative investments and (supposed) job-growing infrastructure projects.

- Several cases have emerged of CCP linked businesspeople giving sizeable donations to political parties in the West in order to develop pro-China lobbies.
- The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the flagship of Xi Jinping's "Rejuvenation" platform and centre piece of China's charm offensive.
  - The network of roads and maritime links promise significant development in the areas involved as well as jobs.
  - However, much of the time China insists on Chinese labour.
- 55% of total BRI investment is in Asia
- Financial contributions and economic contributions can act as coercive traps as well as incentives for self-censorship. This is referred to by some experts as "Sticky Power".
- It also saddles countries with unpayable debts, forcing them to give up critical projects as collateral.
- There are also concerns that China's involvement in digital infrastructure also creates backdoors for espionage purposes.

## 6) Chinese media channels in foreign countries

- China have been moving state influenced media companies into foreign countries.
- The goal of this is to spread a pro-CCP rhetoric within the target audiences.
- Populations then become more receptive and open to China and believe their side of the story on significant issues a lot more.
- Governments in turn feel pressure from their local populations to further support China on the world stage or risk a backlash domestically.
- With this chain reaction of international support, China is left with greater power on the world stage to wield within international bodies and institutions.

# Methodology

## 7) Information operations

China views propaganda internally as a proactive educational tool, contributing to its view of a "harmonious society". Consequently, information operations are critical to China's external strategic goals. Traditional deception and influence tactics have been recalibrated for the digital age and rest heavily on information operations. Data gathering, the infiltration of educational facilities and local media and the training of journalists in effect establishes the infrastructure for information operations. These operations cultivate China's desired image as an efficient, benevolent, non-interfering global leader that draws states into economic partnerships while demonstrating ominous strength to adversaries.

- "The Three Warfares" (San Zhong Zhanfa) – espoused in PLA manuals – rests on communications/narrative dominance:
  1. Psychological – Confuse, disrupt and demoralise the opponent.
  2. Public Opinion – Cultivate sympathy and support from population of target country and beyond, while enforcing the notion of any criticism of China is born from Sinophobia.
  3. Legal/"Lawfare" – Enhance legitimacy of action via use/misuse of law. Traditionally viewed as a separate aspect of hybrid warfare, but the law is based on mutual understanding based on mutual facts/information and its use for geopolitical strategy rests on manipulating that information. PLA military texts emphasise that military actions should always be justified through legal means before any conflict.
- **A constant messaging strategy:**
  - a. First impressions: Respond to events quickly to dominate the narrative.
  - b. Shape events: Constantly work on the narrative on specific events/strategic objectives.
  - c. Iterative adaptation: Break down events/issues to create persuasive arguments over time.
- Targets:
  - Chinese diaspora.
  - Youth audiences.
  - Adversarial leadership.
  - International community, particularly in developing countries.
- Journalist Paul Mozar regards Chinese information operations resting on **four "pillars"**
  - 1) Diplomats (aforementioned "wolf-warriors")
  - 2) State/friendly media (particularly in "neutral" territories like Africa)
  - 3) Sock-puppets (known as the "50 cent army" due to the amount they are paid per post)
  - 4) Bots
    - Much of the content is interspersed with entertaining content like cats, dancing girls, cooking and sports, to make the profiles more authentic: something a Graphika referred to as "**Spamouflage**".
    - China has also begun utilising Russian avenues for conducting information operations: utilising alternative media sources and disguising local media influence to cultivate legitimacy.



# Geographic Examples

Due to its economic power, more subtle methods, and its previous strategy of "biding your time" first expounded by Deng Xiaoping, China has a much greater reach than other Hybrid Warfare practitioners and is active in significantly more countries and regions. The nature of these operations varies in intensity; with some being testing grounds for wider operations and others being the focus of incremental influence building through mainly economic influence.

## Taiwan

Although Albany has no projects in Taiwan or local contacts, it remains an important area to observe as it remains China's primary target for disinformation (some estimate they are targeted with 2,400 pieces of disinformation a day) and can be viewed as a testing ground for China's information operations techniques.

- Main messaging:
  - Taiwan and China are one people
  - Tsai administration is dragging Taiwan to war
  - Taiwan cannot hope to stand against China
    - The USA will abandon Taiwan
    - Doctored images showing Chinese warplanes deep in airspace
    - Incompetence of armed forces
  - Emphasise cultural wedge issues (same-sex marriage, role of religion in politics, flag that should be used in Olympics).
  - Undermine centrist politics by supporting hard-line partisan messaging.
  - Taiwan is a "ghost island" that cannot offer anything to its people
- Methodology
  1. Establish trusted profiles (sometimes by offering online coupons or using attractive 20-25 year old profiles).
  2. Support main profiles and targeted rival messaging with sock-puppets and bots from "content farms" and co-opted local profiles.
  3. Expand Chinese media in the area through infiltration (funding and advertisement for local media, social media pages and online personalities in exchange for towing editorial line).
- Variety of targets:
  - Youth audiences – both to spread message and lure them away to China with promises of better economic situation
  - Pensioners
  - Religious groups
  - Those who are highly partisan (attempt to deepen divide)
  - "Opinion leaders" (celebs and online personalities)
    - Singer/actress Liu Le-Yan, who commented that the Taiwan Strait transit of the PLA Navy aircraft carrier Liaoning was unthreatening because it had "come to protect us,"
    - Master baker Wu Pao-Chun publicly described himself as "a Chinese person who supports the '1992 Consensus'"
- There remains no centralised data base to track and analyse this material; creating a potential opportunity with state-sponsored help.



# Geographic Examples

## Hong Kong

China's response to the pro-democracy protests of 2018 and 2019 were indicative of the CCP's perpetual sense of insecurity and also signalled the first noticeable CCP campaign to aggressively dispute and change the local narrative.

- It became paramount to the CCP to depict the Hong Kong uprising as violent, terroristic and sponsored by foreign powers.
  - In a sample of content from the pages Facebook suspended, one image compared demonstrators to ISIS fighters: "Even though the weapons are different, the outcome is the same!" Another set of images claimed demonstrators harmed a nurse's eye (it was in fact a beanbag from police that caused the damage).
  - On state media, a photo was posted of a woman counting out cash on a Hong Kong sidewalk – insinuating that the protesters were paid agents.
  - The People's Daily Tweeted a cartoon of the demonstrators and western media as tentacles of a US octopus.
- This campaign was carried out over a wide range of Western Social Media Platforms. Indicating an attempt to covertly influence public opinion beyond China with a rarely seen aggression.
  - Twitter identified more than 900 accounts originating from the People's Republic of China that were "deliberately and specifically attempting to sow political discord in Hong Kong," and an additional network of 200,000 accounts that were part of a broader spam campaign.
  - Facebook found seven pages, three groups, and five accounts (one of which had 15,000 followers) it believed were involved in "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" out of China.
  - Youtube removed 210 channels that were distributing doctored or misleading videos depicting demonstrators as violent criminals.
- A report by the Australian strategic policy Institute considered the CCP's Hong Kong information campaign to be "blunt force" and "clumsy" in comparison with Russia's 2016 interference campaign.
  - This is likely because it was convened with extreme haste, future sustained campaigns are unlikely to be the same.
  - Pro-CCP messaging also showed a surprising awareness of messaging that would encourage Western support, mainly through the idea of supporting police and the rule of law.
  - The report also acknowledged, in the longer term, China's investments in [AI](#) may lift its capacity to target and manipulate international social media audiences.
- At the same time, United Front Work Departments set to work undermining international protests and solidarity movements by organising disruptive counter protests. In some cases this led to violent clashes.

# Geographic Examples

## Xinjiang

The mass detention and persecution of the Uyghur population of Xinjiang is regarded as one of the prime examples of growing repression in China. It has also marked a significant evolution in China's methods of manipulating international opinion and the commencement of aggressive pushback on allegations of human rights abuses.

### 1st stage

- Initial reports regarding Uyghur repression with no official comment by Beijing, and flat out denials by diplomats directly confronted by it.
- This was the traditional approach to allegations of human rights abuses by Beijing.

### 2nd stage

- As the scale of oppression grew, including the development of large concentration camps revealed through OSINT, it became harder to hide/deny.
- In response, China acknowledged the presence of these facilities but renamed them "reeducation centres".
- They also invited journalists to view these camps and the larger Xinjiang region while deploying bots masquerading as Uyghurs to push back on accusations of repression, but these methods were clumsy:
  - One journalist likened footage of Uyghurs to "hostage videos" and the entire region feeling like a dystopian Disneyland.
    - One video aired on the BBC showed a crowd of Uyghurs singing along to "if you're happy and you know it, say Yes Sir!"
  - The bots deployed unconvincing messages like: "We have so much freedom here, we are very, very free" repetitively, revealing their nature.

### 3rd stage (2021 onwards)

- As of 2021, China's methods of manipulating the narrative have become much more sophisticated.
  - The bots are now of higher quality, occasionally criticising the CCP (though over issues of corruption that are often followed by praise of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign) and use AI-generated faces rather than stolen profile pictures.
  - China has begun relying on foreign influencers to push their narratives, recognising that state media is less credible outside of China.
  - At the same time Wolf warrior diplomats have seized on issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the January 6 insurrection to accuse the USA of human rights abuses.

# Geographic Examples

## Africa

China has cultivated influence in Africa over a significant period. The most obvious examples are its infrastructure investments. The BRI had an initial \$1 billion infrastructure development fund to help build roads and enabling infrastructure in order to develop trade on the African continent. There are reportedly over 10,000 Chinese-owned firms and construction companies are operating in Africa. But a less perceptible campaign of media penetration has also been conducted since 2004 (when Xinhua moved its HQ to Nairobi), but has accelerated in the last decade. As of today, 5 major Chinese media outlets, with all operations overseen by Chinese officials, operate in Africa.

- CCP social media campaigns in Africa ramped up in 2018/19
  - The CCP used twitter diplomacy to effectively to control the narrative on the African continent during the Hong Kong protests, and with the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. They saw significant support for their stance on these issues within many African states.
  - The further tactic of creating blocs of support within international institutions was seen when the UN resolution to condemn China for their Uyghur treatment didn't have a single African country sign on.
- Africa only accounted for 4% of China's trade with the world in 2020, and the Chinese state have loaned \$153 billion cumulatively between 2000 and 2019 to the continent. The clear answer for this massive expenditure with minimal reward is influence.
  - This influence is gaining traction in Africa, with all 53 countries that hold a Chinese embassy having cut off diplomatic ties with Taiwan.
- Chinese government agencies (from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Education, and a myriad of agencies in between) are actively involved in offering workshops to African public information officers, editors and journalists, as well as numerous scholarships to study journalism, media and communication, and telecoms engineering at Chinese universities.
- They have also strengthened their media presence, particularly in West Africa
  - Xinhua wired media content is provided free of charge, scholarships were offered for the African students in journalism and technical assistance was provided to African broadcast companies by the Chinese agencies. These state-owned agencies also bought media houses, besides setting up their own media enterprises in the Continent.
  - While Ghanaian journalists and policymakers have tended to push back against Chinese media organisations and have limited use of their media sources, which they describe as propaganda, their Nigerian counterparts hold a different view.
    - At one news outlet in Nigeria, when journalists sought to cover specific stories that might be unfavourable to China, their editors reportedly prioritised input from PRC embassy officials and promoted a more positive angle.
    - While Nigerian respondents point out that Chinese media is propaganda, they argue that Western media is no different from Chinese media in that both have certain agendas that are driven by national interest.
    - This is positive on the one hand as it shows that Chinese media is not necessarily viewed as more trusted, but on the other hand also demonstrates Western media is viewed with a similar scepticism which is one of China's goals.

# Geographic Examples

- Further afield, in South Africa, five years after two companies with ties to the Chinese government and state media purchased a 20 percent stake in the country's second-largest media group, a writer who discussed Chinese government repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang had his column abruptly discontinued.
- At CGTN in Nairobi, before a show goes on air, content is always checked by a Chinese national.
  - Because journalists are aware of what might get flagged, self-censorship is common.
  - At Xinhua, all news stories, many of which are written by Africans and freelancers stationed across the continent, must be filed with the Nairobi editors, who are Chinese, before they are eventually sent to subscribers.
  - These oversight editorial procedures are standard in most newsrooms worldwide, including those of other international media based in Africa, but the very clear division of roles based on nationality is unique to Chinese media.
- The combination of investments and media penetration is starting to show results. Surveys in African countries show a strongly favourable view amongst ordinary people of China.
  - A survey of 18 African countries found 23% of the populace believed China was the best model for societal development.
  - Although the majority (32%) still consider the USA to be the best model, it is concerning that the majority of respondents in Burkina Faso and Mali (39 and 38% compared to 21 and 15% for the USA) considered China the best model, with a very slim majority of 6 and 8% for the US in the Ivory Coast and Nigeria respectively.
  - There was also an overall positive view of Chinese loans, with 41% viewing them as having far fewer conditions on them than other international countries as opposed to 21% who thought the opposite.
  - The view of the level Chinese economic influence among Africans is also declining. Dr Joseph Asunka opined that this was because people were now growing used to Chinese activity and so it was less perceptible.
- China is seeing some backlash:
  - Angola, Ghana, Gambia, and Kenya have seen demonstrations against Chinese-funded projects.
  - Similarly, public concern is growing about loans with few strings attached being used to launder money for projects that are never built. Although this is mainly at a local level.
- It is also slowing down its investments
  - In December 2021, at the eighth triennial Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, Beijing cut its financing over the next three years from \$60 billion at the previous summit to \$40 billion.

# Geographic Examples

- There is also a growing fear that Chinese media expansion into Africa "may impede freedom of expression and engender limited professional autonomy for journalists in the sub-region" in the words of one US report.
  - Some express concern that the authoritarian model of the Chinese media may impinge on the freedom of expression and indirectly impact the continent's fragile democratic space.
  - Chinese media subscribe to a model of journalism that emphasises "positive reporting" over the Western model of watchdog journalism that seeks to hold leadership to account.
  - The "positive reporting" model of journalism entails collaboration between the media and government which runs counter to democratic ideals, because when leaders are not criticised they are more likely to turn autocratic and become dictators.
  - There are concerns that Chinese media will replicate this model of journalism in the sub-region and empower political leaders to become dismissive of critical journalism and celebrate adulatory journalism.
  - If this happens, democratic governance will take a nosedive and authoritarian regimes may become entrenched in the sub-region.

# Geographic Examples

## Central Asia (CA)

China and Russia are competing in Central Asia for influence, access to resources, and strategic power in a geographically important region. China sees influence in CA as a way of providing 'security' in the Xinjiang region, and as tensions with the West rise China needs to seek alternate energy sources that are (relatively) free of geopolitical risk. By entering dependant relationships with China, CA governments are turning a blind eye to the CCP's treatment of Uygur Muslims in Xinjiang, as well as suppressing protests that occur within their borders.

- Education

- An increasing number of young people from central Asia are turning to China instead of Russia for education opportunities. This is providing China with an opportunity to expand their soft power over the region.
- Kazakhstan president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, is a fluent Mandarin speaker, and the Kyrgyz President's parents spent the Stalin years exiled in China.
- In 2016 there were just over 22,000 Central Asian students studying in China as a part of President Xi's ten-year education plan.
- Chinese universities rising through world rankings is proving to be a key foreign policy tool that the CCP are exploiting.
  - According to data from the Chinese embassies in Central Asia, in 2019 alone, about 14,000 Kazakh, 4,600 Kyrgyz, 3,500 Tajik, 6,500 Uzbek and more than 2,000 Turkmen students were studying in China.
  - A mandatory step in China's educational strategy in Kyrgyzstan is the showing of 'China's Journey', a propaganda documentary about life in Xinjiang, dubbed in local Central Asian languages. After screening the film to pupils, Chinese ambassadors then enthusiastically invite them to apply for a government scholarship to study in China.
- China is trying to capture the influence of future elites rather than the masses

- Language

- Spreading the influence of the Chinese language is "the most effective way of encouraging a Chinese voice in global affairs" (Niva Yau, researcher based in Bishkek)
- In Kyrgyzstan, many pupils are offered free or compulsory Chinese lessons from the age of 10, and it has been found that this creates a very positive view of China amongst these cohorts.
- Having access to information in the Chinese language means that Central Asian youths can consume the Chinese government's carefully curated propaganda. The Communist Party is thus able to spread certain narratives to other countries.
- "There is a plan to station one Chinese language teacher in every primary school in Kyrgyzstan," said Wang Tong-chuang, a Chinese businessman familiar with the work of the Chinese embassy in Bishkek.

- Security

- In Tajikistan, Beijing has a small but growing security presence. Several reports appeared in 2019 to suggest that Beijing has obtained rights "to refurbish or build up to 30 to 40 guard posts on the Tajik side of the country's border with Afghanistan.

# Geographic Examples

- Overall, the region continues to rely on Russia for direct security, especially as China shows an unwillingness to involve itself in potentially long-lasting conflicts with “boots on the ground”.
- In the aftermath of the uprising in Kazakhstan, China has increased its exports of surveillance technology to the region. At the same time, the Global Times ran the headline: “China’s valuable governance experience in Xjinjiang may help Kazakhstan”.
- However, there have been growing tensions in the region.
  - Maps and schoolbooks in China showing large sections of Central Asia as being part of China’s historic lands.
  - Continued wilful blindness by leaders in the region towards persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang has fostered some dissent and protests within CA.
  - Despite growing ties between China and CA, Russia remains the country the population identifies with.
    - On November 2 2021, the Central Asia Barometer group released the findings of its polls in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan asking people who they thought would be the first to help their countries in a time of need.
    - In Kazakhstan, only 4.9 percent of respondents thought China would be the best able to help with economic and other problems.
    - In Uzbekistan, only 2.6 percent of the respondents thought China would come to Tashkent’s aid.
    - Russia topped both those polls with 54.3 percent in Kazakhstan and 53.9 percent in Uzbekistan.



# Geographic Examples

## MENA

Previously, China has little appetite for getting involved in such a turbulent region, once labelling it: “a chaotic and dangerous graveyard, burying empires”, but now, China has been exploiting disenchantment with the US among many citizens and governments in MENA to create inroads into the region and secure its growing demand for crude oil.

- It has signed five ‘comprehensive strategic partnerships’, with Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria, and Egypt.
- Beijing has been helping the Saudis build a new batch of ballistic missiles that Riyadh has likely commissioned to counter Iran’s missile fleet.
- It has also been active in Iraq and Syria:
  - According to Iraqi officials, Iraq needs a total of 8,000 schools to “fill the gap in the education sector.” China has decided to construct the bulk of those—7,000 schools—to help educate millions of children.
  - It will also build nearly 90,000 houses in Sadr City, the bastion of one of Iraq’s strongest political leader and cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr; improve Baghdad’s sewerage; build an airport in Nasiriyah, Iraq; and construct 1,000 health care clinics all over the country—in exchange for Iraqi oil.
  - On January 13 Syria and China signed a “memorandum of understanding” on the BRI (it remains yet to be seen how this will translate).
- These projects are utilised to legitimates China's vision of the international order to both domestic and international audiences: rather than interfering in Middle Eastern affairs as the United States has China is supporting multiple parties and preserving the balance of power. But in reality, China is exacerbating existing instability between powers.
- In assisting Saudi Arabia’s missile program, China effectively fuels the arms race in the Gulf.
- By supporting Iran diplomatically and economically, China has emboldened Iran to take a harder line and redirect its resources to conduct proxy warfare campaigns across the region.

# Geographic Examples

## South Asia

- The Chinese debt trap narrative doesn't seem to apply to the four South Asian countries that China is most active in, but China remains keen to establish economic footholds that can translate into influence.
- In the four countries studied by the Carnegie endowment, state actors all expressed some form of scepticism or desire to control and mitigate Chinese influence within their own borders.
- Suggestions made in the report state that most effective counter-intervention from the US and its strategic partners should focus on its own merits, rather than an overt counter operation to Chinese influence Nepal.
- These four states are attracted to the non-interference approach that China take. It is suggested that if the US and its partners' wishes to become attractive to the national governments, it should focus on building the capacity of civil society.
  - All four countries have established media outlets and civil society organisations that have a strong focus on good governance. These can be supported; putting pressure on governments from within rather than externally
- In Nepal, China has been upping its outreach through its ambassador to the country. In 2020 the Chinese ambassador to Nepal gave 6 interviews to state media channels, wrote 5 newspaper articles, and 4 op-eds on Chinese vaccines given to Nepal
  - The timing of this coincides with the general CCP tactics of saving face and changing the narrative around the pandemic.
- As of 2022, China has continued to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties with Pakistan.
  - In September 2020 they signed an agreement to create a Pakistan-China economic Corridor.
  - In return for investment in its infrastructure projects, Pakistan supports China by dismissing human rights abuses against Muslim's in Xinjiang.
  - These ties may develop into security and intelligence cooperation aimed at undermining India.
  - Ties have been undermined by instability in Pakistan caused by Jihadists, which has led to the deaths of several Chinese workers.
- India is likely to become a significant target for Chinese hybrid operations.
  - Disputes over borders in the Himalayas in 2021 led to violent clashes, killing up to 120 PLA members. China has since sought to strengthen its claims to these territories via lawfare measures:
    - Building of villages and installations on disputed borders.
    - Land Bill (Jan. 2021) – co-opts locals on borders to assist PLA while enshrining defending sovereignty and land border security into law.
  - India already suffers from growing ethnic tensions inflamed by homegrown Hindu-nationalist radical politics and disinformation and Islamist extremist violence purportedly perpetrated with the assistance Pakistan's intelligence service (ISI).
    - These issues could be exploited by Chinese disinformation operations to undermine India's internal security while damaging its international image, making it more difficult for western states to pursue important partnerships with India and condemn China.

# Geographic Examples

## South-East Asia

- Although China's claims to the South China Sea (SCS) continue to be a source of tension, it has succeeded in continuing to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties to the region by investing and obtaining controlling stakes in infrastructure projects:
  - Cambodia - October 2018: All 8 turbines of the 400-megawatt Lower Sesan II Hydropower Plant became operational in Cambodia as part of a joint venture among China's Huaneng Hydropower International Energy holding 51 percent of the stake.
  - In Malaysia, as of 2019, it has continued building the East Coast Rail link.
  - In Myanmar, despite the military junta's increasingly poor image abroad, China remains one of its strongest defenders in international forums and its largest arms supplier but appears hesitant to recommence infrastructure projects until the security situation has becalmed.
  - Under Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines moved closer to China's orbit, but he has since become disillusioned, alleging that in 2017 President Xi raised the threat of war if the Philippines continued to develop a gas field off the coast. Of all his potential successors, none are openly pro-China.
- There is a growing split in ASEAN between pro-China and China-sceptic countries.
  - Cambodia, who will chair ASEAN summit in 2022, is the most pro-China.
  - Indonesia's Maritime Security Agency has invited counterparts from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam to 'share experiences and foster brotherhood' as the six Southeast Asian countries most affected by China's activities in the SCS.
- China is also undertaking media and education penetration efforts in order to bring the information environment in the region into line with CCP interests using financial backing, Confucius Institutes and United Front Work Departments (UFWD):
  - a. Singapore
    - Beijing is using clan associations—as well as business associations, youth programs and Chinese-language media outlets—to sway public opinion and policy.
    - There is a proliferation of UFWD proxy groups (e.g. China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (CCPPNR), Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), China Overseas Friendship Association (COFA), and the China Zhi Gong Party (CZG).
  - b. The Philippines
    - Majority of disinformation has been spread domestically, with no government initiative to tackle it (an upcoming change of government may change this).
    - There are also fears that this lays groundwork for Chinese info ops, particularly undermining trust in the US.
- Continued proliferation of UFWD proxies.

# Geographic Examples

- There has also been a worrying increase in Chinese media penetration:
  - The Manila Times receives funding in return for pro-China messaging.
  - In August 2020, Reuters reported that the Chinese tech firm ByteDance had censored articles critical of the Chinese government on its Baca Berita (BaBe) news aggregator app, which is used by millions in Indonesia, from 2018 to mid-2020, based on instructions from a team at the company's Beijing headquarters.
    - The restricted content reportedly included references to "Tiananmen" and "Mao Zedong," as well as to China-Indonesia tensions over the South China Sea and a local ban on the video-sharing app TikTok, which is also owned by ByteDance.

# Geographic Examples

## Australia

Australian security services have become increasingly concerned regarding the growth of Chinese influence in Australian politics for some time. Australia's growing outspokenness against China's international aggressiveness, close ties to the US and its large Chinese minority has made it a ripe target for influence. The recent AUKUS alliance likely means Chinese hybrid operations will become increasingly geared towards disruption as well as influence.

- China has a history of buying influence through donations to MPs, the most obvious incident being in the "Dastyari Affair"
  - In June 2016, Dastyari held a pre-election press conference organized by Huang and the ACPPRC to which only Chinese-language media were invited. China's behavior in the South China Sea had become a pointed foreign policy question as the parties were heading into a federal election on July 2, 2016.
  - The previous day, Shadow Defence Minister of the Labor Party Stephen Conroy had criticised the Turnbull government for being too timid in confronting China over its "absurd" island building and declared that the Labor Party would support conducting freedom of navigation operations, at a time when U.S. freedom of navigation operations were provoking strong criticism from China. Dastyari, however, took a very different line.
    - Standing next to Huang Xiangmo, Dastyari said "the South China Sea is China's own affair" and that the Labor Party, "as a supporter of China, and as a friend of China," would help maintain the relationship by "knowing when it is and isn't our place to be involved." He added, "Australia should remain neutral and respect China's decision."
  - Dastyari has since stepped down, but some intelligence officials fear that China's influence of MPs remains only at a more covert level.
- China has also sought to co-opt the significant Chinese diaspora community.
  - According to the 2016 census, 41 percent of ethnic Chinese in Australia were born in China, with a majority (60 percent) having arrived after 2006.
  - Through the UFWD the CCP hopes to persuade Australians of Chinese descent, regardless of their country of origin or their current citizenship, that they are "the sons and daughters of China," unified in patriotism and loyalty to the CCP.
  - United Front work has also focused on "political astroturfing" events to make it seem as if there is overwhelming grassroots support in the ethnic Chinese community for Beijing and its policies while also drowning out critics.
    - One such event, in July 2019, At the University of Queensland, Hong Kong demonstrators were confronted and disrupted by pro-Beijing protesters organised by UFWD who yelled abuse as the Chinese national anthem was blasted from a speaker and ripped posters from the hands of opponents, prompting shoving and physical confrontations.

# Geographic Examples

- 30th November 2020, on the heels of a report indicating war crimes by the Australian military in Afghanistan, a Chinese Foreign Ministry official tweeted a doctored image of an Australian soldier holding a knife to an Afghan child.
- China is Australia's largest trading partner (35%), at face value Australia almost has more to lose, economically (only 6% of Chinese trade). China has used this to its advantage
  - May 2020, an 80% tariff on Australian barley imports was imposed, threatening the \$1.5 billion trade between the nations.
  - Next in line was Australian beef imports, citing 'technical issues' rather than a response to the COVID-19 inquiry calls.
  - Coal became the next target, placing informal quotas that led to \$700 million worth of Australian coal delayed at ports. Lobster, cotton, and wine faced dubious screening practices, stranding imports. A 200% tariff on wine imports followed, diminishing a \$6 billion industry.

## Maritime

- Part of the B&R Initiative is a network of maritime routes all over the globe leading China to invest heavily in ports.
- The PLA considers information operations to be a key part of supporting activities in contested maritime regions:
  - Boosting its claims to the South/East China Seas and Taiwan in parallel to denying the building of artificial islands and deployment of maritime militias (the "little blue men of the South China Sea").
  - These in turn used to justify extensions of Exclusive Economic Zones and consolidate areas within China's self-declared "Nine-dash Line" (originating from a map in 1948). These claims have been repeatedly rejected by the International Courts.

# Geographic Examples

## Europe

China's influence campaigns in Europe continue to be viewed as relatively mild in comparison to the much more aggressive tactics utilised by Russia. But it has already established a useful network of proxies and has started to utilise more aggressive messaging tactics as relations with the west deteriorate.

- Central and Eastern Europe
  - China has limited its influence-building activities in the region in order to avoid clashing with Russia. However, it has acted against states that are perceived to threaten its domestic security.
  - In July 2021, Lithuania announced it would be opening a Taiwanese representative office in the capital under the name Taiwan; directly contradicting the idea of "One China".
  - China has since imposed an unofficial economic boycott on Lithuania while attempting to isolate it internationally.
  - In the Czech Republic the Chinese embassy and Chinese propaganda affiliates have co-opted local fringe media to enhance pro-china messaging and disinformation efforts as well as funding researchers at universities and thinktanks to present topics in a more pro-China light. They also released faked "evidence" of the former Senate President receiving a bribe to visit Taiwan.
  - These efforts have been replicated in Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia and Hungary.
- Western Europe
  - Between 2000 and 2018, data shows that China had invested nearly £41billion in the UK alone, while Germany had received £20billion and France and Italy around (£12.5billion) each.
  - Analysts at Bloomberg previously concluded that China now owned, or had a stake in, four airports, six maritime ports and 13 professional football teams in Europe.
  - More than 20 countries are now a part of the Belt and Road Initiative, creating fears China will use its economic leverage to discourage anti-China policies.
- The UK
  - During the Cameron administration, China was encouraged to make significant investments in the UK, but relations have since soured.
  - In July 2021, Ken McCallum, DG of MI5, expressed public warnings about China's widespread influence efforts that include recruitment campaigns through LinkedIn, buying parliamentary influence through financial donations and undermining trusted institutions through information campaigns.
  - Two BBC Reports in May 2020 and July 2021 illustrated how Beijing has utilised fake social media accounts and co-opted foreign influencers ("stringers") to spread pro-China messaging.
  - After the report's release, there was a spike in anti-BBC social media posts on Western and Chinese platforms from sock-puppet accounts, boosted by bots, accusing the BBC of adding a "gloom-filter" to images from China and Sinophobia, while sharing material about the West's past human rights abuses and "incompetence" in handling Covid-19 and how the BBC had failed to cover them.



# Geographic Examples

- On 13th Jan 2022, MI5 released a public warning to parliament that Christine Lee, a prominent law firm executive and donor to multiple MPs, was a Chinese influence agent seeking to establish links to prominent MPs.
- Chinese oligarchs (“big crocs”) are also moving into the London property market
  - In 2019, before they became the biggest buyers, mainland Chinese and Hong Kong buyers invested £7.7 billion in London’s property market.
  - As of 2021, fifteen per cent of homes bought for more than £1 million by international buyers in prime central London are now bought by those from China or Hong Kong
  - One in every five of those with an asking price of £10m or more are bought by Chinese buyers.
- (Not all of these are Beijing-linked, some are Hong Kongers relocating.)

# Geographic Examples

## Latin America

- So far, China has funnelled \$137 billion dollars into the region.
- Brazil, the region's largest economy, bilateral trade with China rose from \$2 billion in 2000 to \$100 billion last year. Today, Brazil sends 30% of all exports to China, including 80% of its soybean crop and 60% of its iron ore.
- For China, the investment brings political returns.
  - In the past four years, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Panama have each switched their recognition from Taiwan to China.
  - Latin America offers Beijing invaluable votes at the U.N. and backing for Chinese appointees to multinational institutions.
  - It also empowers China to embed standard-setting technology companies like Huawei, ZTE, Dahua and Hikvision in regional infrastructure, allowing Beijing to dictate the rules of commerce for a generation.
- China has a growing presence in Panama
  - In 2017, China Landbridge Group broke ground on a new \$1 billion deepwater port and logistics complex on Panama's Margarita Island, where the Panama Colón Container Port will take over land once occupied by a U.S. military base.
  - A long-existing Chinese diaspora community exists that provides scope for UFWD activities
- COVID-19 presented another opportunity.
  - By late October, China had provided over 179 billion masks, 1.73 billion protective suits and 543 million testing kits to 150 countries and seven international organizations around the globe.
  - Shipments of Chinese aid have elicited fawning praise from previously China-skeptic leaders like Argentina's President Alberto Fernández, who wrote a letter in January that "thanked China for supporting Argentina's fight against COVID-19" and backed "building a community with a shared future for mankind, a notion put forward by Xi," according to China's state newswire Xinhua.
- Vaccines can be used to build bridges and make countries more dependent
  - In September 2020, São Paulo Governor João Doria said Brazil's federal government had also agreed to buy 60 million doses of CoronaVac, later telling reporters it "is the safest, the one with the best and most promising rates."
  - On Jan. 6 2021, Peru's President Francisco Sagasti announced the purchase of 38 million vaccine doses from state-run Chinese firm Sinopharm.
  - Mexico has signed an advance-purchase agreement with another Chinese developer, CanSino Biologics, for 35 million doses of a single-dose immunization under development.

# Geographic Examples

- China has also sought to increase its media foothold in the region.
  - China Central Television (CCTV) has a 24-hour channel, CGTN Spanish, which is available online, free of charge.
  - The magazine China Today, which remains one of the few examples of Chinese print media in Latin America, maintains two Spanish-language websites.
  - Nearly all of these outlets have Spanish-language accounts on social media that are banned in China, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.
  - Despite an already extensive presence in the region, some Chinese media professionals and scholars argue that China can do better. A 2018 study by Professor Guo Cunhai of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Latin American Studies noted that, while Latin Americans' perceptions of China are generally more positive than those of Europeans and Americans, these perceptions still lag behind Africa's image.

# Geographic Examples

## USA

As China's rival to global hegemony, the US is the ultimate target of its influence operations as it seeks to separate the US from its allies and construct an image of it as a hypocritical, bully presiding over a dysfunctional and unfair global system that seeks to undermine China out of narrow-minded imperialism. China has also signalled its preparedness for open conflict with the US; using mock-up USA warships as target practice in military drills. However, open war is more likely to occur from accidental rather than deliberate causes. China will continue with a long-term strategy of Hybrid efforts.

- China continues to conduct cyber operations aimed at stealing economic and security secrets; in 2020, the FBI reported such a case was opened every 10 hours.
- In March 2020, fake texts circulated across the country warning of an impending national quarantine enforced by the military, sparking panic. The texts were later traced to Chinese intelligence.
- The CCP continues to utilise the events of January 6th 2021, the Covid Crisis and the after effects of the USA's past failed policies in Iraq and its flight from Afghanistan to continue to push three of its central (oversimplified/misinformation) narratives:
  - a. "the East is rising, the West is in decline."
  - b. The CCP system provides order, wealth, stability and respects other states (in contrast to the liberal democratic system).
  - c. The USA is not a reliable partner.
- The ultimate aim is to isolate the US via gaining influence in the International Community and International Institutions until the CCP has enough influence to sideline the US without an open conflict. Following Tsun Tzu's dictum of "winning without fighting."

# Recommended Responses

Information operations are at the core of hybrid warfare. This is particularly the case with China as it focuses on influence building rather than kinetic actions. COMPCOM is therefore the spear tip of counter-hybrid operations; as one EU report surmised:

“In a society overloaded with information and contradictory messages, strategic communications are key to developing a retaining wall for countering the constant flow of disinformation, misinformation, cyberespionage, leaks of stolen information, digital harassment, manipulation and other forms of information used by promoters of hybrid threats.”

Countering Chinese influence and information operations will be a long and multifaceted task. Involving a range of counter operations, many of which hinge on education.

## 1) Resilience Operations

- Resilience is as much about exposing disinformation actors as improving local media literacy capabilities.
- Media monitoring could help identify spikes in the pro-Russian narratives on critical issues, assisting with attribution.
- Perhaps the publication/“naming and shaming” of Chinese methods and figures involved could be turned into regularly distributed material?
- A citizens guide to recognising disinformation/Chinese influenced media?

## 2) Journalism Training and Education

- Training journalists not just in recognising disinformation but countering it and maintaining independence will be critical in stemming the flow of Chinese media penetration while countering Chinese (and, to a lesser extent, Russian) narratives of the West as equally interfering/hypocritical.

## 3) Media literacy and outreach programs to news consumers

- Resilience to disinformation partly rests on awareness of the public.
- Multiple reports have suggested the grating of media literacy into high school IT modules.
- Establishing a fact checking centre or a citizens guide to recognising disinformation/Chinese influenced media could assist with this while providing benefits of its own.

# Recommended Responses

## 4) Information Sharing and Coordination

- One EU report on countering hybrid threats suggested a “coordination unit” whose work would consistently develop over time.
  - This could face difficulties from infighting and member states departments having to cede authority.
  - Similar results could be achieved with a Centre of Excellence that could avoid departmental bickering.
- Another suggestion was the creation of a “common response mechanism” - but the feasibility of this is low.
- An opposing suggestion deemed to be more feasible was “combined training exercises” in countering disinformation.
- In 2017, a common set of proposals for the implementation of the Joint Declaration on EU-NATO cooperation, related to countering hybrid threats, was defined:
  - Creation of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid threats.
  - Enhanced staff-to-staff sharing of time-critical information between the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell and its relevant NATO counterparts.
  - Development of technical systems to allow systematic exchange of information.
  - Intensified cooperation and undertake shared trend analysis of disinformation.
  - Encouragement of cooperation between the NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence and the EEAS StratCom Task Forces.
  - Enhanced preparedness for crisis response, seeking to synchronise the two organisations' crisis response activities.
  - Raised awareness amongst EU countries and NATO allies on existing and planned resilience requirements, and help them to improve such resilience.
  - Implementation of parallel and coordinated exercises (PACE), including hybrid elements.

**While China does have a number of hybrid operations active in the West, one of the greatest concerns is in the developing world. Albany has delivered successful resilience building programmes in the Baltics, fact checking centres in Central Asia, COMPCOM training in Nigeria and a CVE Centre for Excellence in Djibouti. Such programs could be replicated to counter Chinese information operations.**

# Key resources

[AfroBarometer. Africans' perceptions about China: A sneak peek from 18 countries](#)

[ASPI. Tweeting through the Great Firewall: Preliminary Analysis of PRC-linked Information Operations on the Hong Kong Protests](#)

[BBC. How a fake network pushes pro-China propaganda](#)

[Chatham House. Big power rivalry: Who is winning the popularity wars?](#)

[European Council. China's great game in the Middle East](#)

[European Parliamentary Research Service. Strategic communications as a key factor in countering hybrid threats](#)

[Financial Times. UK seeks to counter China's influence with new development investment arm](#)

[Foreign Policy. How China's Diplomats Are Portraying the Russia-Ukraine Crisis](#)

[Foreign Policy. What is China's Future in Africa?](#)

[Foreign Policy. Xi Jinping Has Transformed China's Middle East Policy](#)

[Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. Winning Without Fighting: Chinese and Russian Political Warfare Campaigns](#)

[China's state media in Latin America: profile and prospects](#)

[China's Wolf Warriors Are Turning the World Against Beijing](#)

[Council on Foreign Relations. What is the Influence of Chinese Media in West Africa?](#)

[CSIS. Countering Chinese Influence Activities in Australia](#)

[Freedom House. Beijing's Global Megaphone: The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence since 2017](#)

[Graphika. Spamouflage Breakout: Chinese Spam Network Finally Starts to Gain Some Traction](#)

[How China's 'wolf warrior' diplomats use and abuse Twitter](#)

[National Endowment For Democracy. China's Global Media Footprint](#)

[OpenDemocracy.net. China polishes its image in Central Asia through the soft power of language](#)

[RAND. Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media](#)