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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; China; Hong Kong; India; South Asia; Bhutan

HONG KONG VOTERS SPURN "PATRIOTS ONLY" ELECTION

Despite an all-out government push to get people to vote, Hong Kong's "patriots only" local polls, which barred the opposition from standing, have drawn the lowest turnout since Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997. In a snub to China's overhaul of the city's electoral system, which ensures that only those loyal to Beijing can hold office, fewer than 1.2 million Hong Kongers – just 27.5% of those eligible – voted in the district council elections. Candidates were required to undergo national security screening and secure nominations from government-appointed committees. Hong Kong's Beijing-chosen leader, John Lee, called the election "the last piece of the puzzle to implement the principles of patriots governing Hong Kong." The last time such elections were held, in 2019, months of anti-government protests galvanized a 71% turnout and a landslide victory for the city's pro-democracy camp. (*CNN*, December 11, 2023)

CHINA HACKS U.S. INFRASTRUCTURE

The People's Liberation Army has hacked into U.S. infrastructure, including power, water utilities, communications and transportation systems. Over the past year, PLA-affiliated hackers have burrowed into the computer systems of about two dozen critical entities, including a water utility in Hawaii, a major West Coast port, and an oil and gas pipeline. They also tried but failed to access the Texas power grid. U.S. officials have identified the cyber campaign, dubbed Volt Typhoon, as part of China's broader effort to develop the capacity to sow chaos or snarl logistics in the event of a U.S.-China conflict. Several entities outside the U.S., including electric utilities, have also been targeted by the Chinese hackers. (*Washington Post*, December 11, 2023)

CHINA'S FALLING FERTILITY RATE NOW "AN UNAVOIDABLE NORM"

Over the past five years, the number of newborns in China fell 40%, with 9.56 million babies born last year. Chinese births, which peaked in 2016, are expected to fall even further this year, to 7-8 million. China's fertility rate dropped to 1.09 in 2022 from 1.3 in 2020. Last year, the number of students enrolled in kindergartens and preschools fell. "The downward trend in fertility rates has become an unavoidable norm," notes a new survey by the South China University of Technology. "Unlocking reproductive potential requires a family-friendly and child-friendly environment that values individual development, family welfare and the easing of work-family conflicts," it added. (*South China Morning Post*, December 12, 2023)

CHINESE FACEBOOK ACCOUNTS SPREAD FAKE NEWS IN INDIA

Social media giant Meta has identified thousands of Facebook accounts originating in China and aimed at spreading fake news in India. Earlier this year, Meta dismantled a large network of fake accounts in China pretending to be Indians. The accounts use sophisticated strategies to manipulate public opinion and influence discourse and share misleading information on Indian politics and security. "This network operated fictitious personas on Facebook posing as journalists, lawyers and human-rights activists. The network posted mainly in English, and to a lesser extent in Hindi and Chinese, about regional news, culture, sports and travel in Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh. Notably, the Tibet-focused accounts posed as pro-independence activists who also accused exiled Tibetan leader the Dalai Lama and his followers of corruption and pedophilia," Meta reported. (*NDTV*, December 5, 2023)

SATELLITE IMAGES SHOW CHINA IS BUILDING IN BHUTAN

Satellite photographs from December 7th reveal China's construction of dozens of buildings in neighboring Bhutan's Jakarlung and Menchuma Valleys; the two areas where Beijing is seeking to negotiate a land deal with the tiny Himalayan kingdom. At least 129 buildings have been built in one enclave, and 62 in the another. Beijing's construction has changed the reality on the ground, forcing Bhutan to the negotiating table. "This case represents China making a very recent, doubtful claim about an area that is of great cultural significance to a far less powerful neighbor, knowing that neighbor has few if any options," says Robert Barnett of the University of London. (*Newsweek*, December 13, 2023)