AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY PAPER

NOVEMBER 2026 • NO. 2

ASSESSING THE CHINESE INFORMATIONAL CHALLENGE

ILAN BERMAN & CALLA O'NEIL

HIGHLIGHTS

China treats information as a decisive arena of competition with the United States. PLA doctrine directs the military to prepare for "informationized local wars," establishing information warfare as a core pillar of China's warfighting strategy.

Beijing is exporting its model of information control. Through BRI projects, China is embedding its technology in foreign information infrastructure, granting Beijing access to the data that flows through it.

Washington should make the information space a strategic priority. That means rebuilding its capacity to combat foreign disinformation campaigns, reinvigorating public diplomacy, and exploring tech partnerships with the developing world as an alternative to China.

Today, the United States is locked in a deepening great power rivalry with the People's Republic of China (PRC). In recent years, this contest has taken on many names. It was defined as "great power competition" during the Trump administration's first term in office,[1] and subsequently first as "long-term strategic competition" and then as "managed competition" during the presidency of Joseph Biden.[2] In the second Trump administration, the terminology has shifted significantly, as has the emphasis. At their May 2026 summit in Beijing, President Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized the need for "strategic stability"—that is, the management of bilateral relations through a more predictable strategic relationship.

Nevertheless, Washington today is clearly competing with Beijing across a number of domains, from supply chains to artificial intelligence to infrastructure provision to parts of the developing world. To date, however, one arena has received remarkably short shrift: the information domain. In recent years, the U.S. has failed to adequately track, let alone contest, the PRC's activities in the information

Ilan Berman is Senior Vice President at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC, and a member of the Boards of Directors of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks.

Calla O'Neil is a Research Fellow and Program Officer at the Council.

space, whether in the context of Chinese messaging to foreign audiences or its adroit use of propaganda and disinformation.

Those activities are voluminous, and a full cataloguing of them remains beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the pages below seek to outline the ideological drivers of China's approach to information, as well as the extensive technological infrastructure it has erected in pursuit of dominance in the "cognitive warfare" space.

INFORMATION AND CHINESE STRATEGY

China's contemporary activities in the information domain rest on two core beliefs about the present state of global affairs. The first is that, since the world has entered the Information Age, success in modernization requires "intelligentization"—a process defined as "the strategic integration of information and communication technologies to transform the economy, government, society, and military."[3] Second, and related, is that victory in future conflicts will depend heavily upon a given nation's ability to harness and control information.[4]

These beliefs have guided the evolution of the military strategy of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). In 1993, the PLA revised its strategic guidelines to address how emerging technologies were transforming warfare, and instructed its forces to prepare for "local wars under modern, high-technology conditions."[5] By 2005, those guidelines had changed to focus on preparing for "informationized local wars," a shift that established information warfare as the centerpiece of Chinese warfighting. At the same time, the practice of information manipulation has played a prominent role in Chinese thinking about asymmetric conflict. In their now-famous 1999 treatise on "unrestricted warfare," PLA Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui identified media warfare as a discrete means of attack—both during conventional wars and as a way of attacking the morale and cohesion of an adversary during peacetime.[6]

This transformation has been more than conceptual. As the scholar Dean Cheng has outlined, the past decade has seen a significant reorganization of the PLA to, among other things, enable more effective conduct of the "three warfares": public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare.[7] This has included the creation of new services, such as the PLA Strategic Support Force, tasked specifically with the prosecution of "informationized local wars." According to Cheng, "[t]his entity brings China's space, network warfare, and electronic warfare forces under a single structure."[8]

Doctrinally, meanwhile, the foundation of China's contemporary information warfare strategy is the advantage gained by a nation in collecting, controlling, manipulating, and defending information more effectively than its adversary.[9] According to the PLA's National Defense University, an institution under the direct leadership of the CCP's Central Military Commission, information dominance is achieved through four discrete tactics:

Information deterrence: the demonstration of offensive information capabilities to discourage an adversary from contesting the information space. Through large-scale information operations against adversary troops and military equipment—including spoofing, jamming, and network attacks—the PLA aims to make adversaries psychologically reluctant to act in the information space.[10]

Information blocking: the targeted disruption of an adversary's communication networks and information systems. Its purpose is to cut off the adversary from the outside world, degrade its radar and optoelectronic reconnaissance capabilities, and neutralize its offensive information operations, thereby creating a "partially closed off status on the battlefield."[11] Doing so, Chinese planners believe, would grant PRC forces a distinct advantage against "isolated and scattered enemies."[12]

Information campaign methods: deception intended to lead adversaries to false intelligence assessments. These methods include defensive measures, such as electronic disguise and network spoofing, to conceal Chinese military activity, as well as offensive measures designed to confuse or mislead the adversary. The goal is both to create favorable conditions for Chinese forces and to add an element of surprise to offensive attacks.[13]

Information pollution: the weaponization of "false, useless, and malicious information" to pollute the adversary's information systems.[14] This includes flooding the adversary's systems with false information, as well as deploying viruses that destroy information networks and alter data.[15]

Notably, China's interest in information is not solely the purview of its military planners. Rather, officials in Beijing increasingly have come to view propaganda as

intrinsic to the attainment of their geopolitical objectives. As a practical matter, this involves communicating with foreign publics, elevating the Chinese viewpoint and denigrating that of the West.

To this end, at the 2013 National Conference on Publicity and Ideological Work, then-new Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping first defined international messaging and public diplomacy as a core pillar of Chinese statecraft. He called on Party leaders to find new ways to "tell China's story well, and properly disseminate China's voice."[16]

For Xi, telling China's story well means presenting a national narrative that showcases the historical, cultural, and ideological uniqueness of China while emphasizing its contributions to the world. He defines China's national image as "a civilized great power with a profound historical heritage, a diverse yet unified ethnic group, and a harmonious and diverse culture."[17]

Xi has directed the Party to promote this narrative both at home and abroad. Domestically, he has instructed that Chinese education systems, entertainment industries, and research institutions be used to promote the ideals of patriotism, collectivism, and socialism among the Chinese population, and to "guide the Chinese people in establishing and upholding the correct views on history, nation, country, and culture."[18] Internationally, the same narrative is tailored to resonate with audiences in different countries and regions, with the goal of expanding "the international public-opinion circle of friends who know China and are friendly to China."[19]

CONTEMPORARY PRIORITIES

China's efforts in this domain are massive in scope. Open source studies have estimated the PRC to be spending "at least $10 billion a year" on a broad spectrum of propaganda activities.[20] Classified assessments, meanwhile, put the figure at substantially higher—perhaps as much as three times more.[21] According to the U.S. Department of State, these efforts include flooding the information space with posts from government-linked accounts, pursuing legal action against critics of Chinese policies, and investing in local media organizations to control their messaging around China, most notably in Latin America and Africa.[22] Today, moreover, this ecosystem is expanding in five concrete domains.

DOMESTIC INFORMATION CONTROL

Two decades ago, when visitors to the PRC accessed the internet to search for terms deemed "politically sensitive" (such as references to Tiananmen Square), their access would be routinely blocked by Chinese censors. This information denial strategy was an early hallmark of the "Great Firewall" through which the Chinese Communist Party sought to suppress inconvenient ideas at variance with its preferred worldview. In the years since, however, the PRC has gravitated to an expanded model of domestic information control: one that revolves around an information economy of abundance.

China's present-day informational architecture is a vast ecosystem of digital platforms, social media networks, and online content that provides its citizens with an unprecedented volume of information, entertainment, and opportunities for engagement. Prominent features of this structure include:

- Run by tech giant Tencent, WeChat serves as an all-purpose digital ecosystem, linking public accounts, group chats and content feeds, all of which are subject to censorship and central control.
- Administered by tech conglomerate ByteDance, Douyin is the Chinese domestic analogue to wildly popular social media app TikTok. It serves as a major source of entertainment and news for Chinese users, with vastly different content than that which is available to foreign users of TikTok.
- A principal platform for news and commentary, Weibo can be manipulated by state censors to shape social media and public discussion by the promotion, suppression, or outright removal of trending topics and posts.
- China's analogue to Western search engines such as Google, Baidu helps the state to shunt online users and information-seekers to search results that are filtered and ranked according to Chinese regulations and censors.
- *People's Daily* is the official newspaper (and now digital publisher) of the Chinese Communist Party, and articulates the CCP's official positions.
- The state broadcasting and media colossus known as the China Media Group produces television, radio, video, and online programming that reinforces official narratives for both domestic and international audiences. These are disseminated through outlets such as CCTV, CGTN, and China National Radio.

These platforms serve different functions but share common significance in at least four respects. First, they impart digital self-sufficiency to China's media and information sphere, with WeChat and other platforms offering domestic alternatives to foreign messaging and information outlets—thereby keeping internet users within China's own heavily regulated ecosystem. Second, the proliferation of entertainment-driven engagement via platforms such as Douyin offer enormous quantities of content, obviating the need for users to look elsewhere (that is, to parts of the internet beyond Beijing's control). Third, platforms such as Douyin rely heavily on personal recommendation algorithms—algorithms that, as a result of prevailing Chinese law, require platforms to promote officially approved values and prioritize state-approved content.[23] Finally, outlets from the China Media Group (like Xinhua, *People's Daily* and CCTV) are closely integrated with commercial media, with the former providing official narratives and the latter disseminating them widely.

The effectiveness of this approach was illustrated in a 2019 study published in the *American Economic Review*, which found that nearly half of a group of university students in Beijing who were provided with internet circumvention tools did not activate them at all. Among those who did, "almost none spend time browsing foreign news websites that are blocked."[24] In other words, Chinese netizens can increasingly find the information and distraction they seek within China's own information ecosystem, without needing to venture onto Western websites and away from state control.

DIGITAL CONTROL AS AN EXPORT

The information space provides a useful medium through which Chinese exports can confer decisive geopolitical advantage. Accordingly, the dissemination of information technology has, over the past dozen years, become a cornerstone of Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Embedded within the BRI's economic and infrastructure-development goals is a digital agenda referred to as the "Digital Silk Road." It represents a manifestation of Beijing's pursuit of information control beyond its borders. By exporting technologies that carry, collect, and store foreign data, the PRC gains access to that information while designing the domestic information ecosystems of BRI countries in its own image and according to its own preferences.

The first tool in China's toolbox are submarine fiber-optic cables. Undersea cables carry over 95 percent of international data, which includes personal, financial, and medical records as well as sensitive government information—making them an attractive asset for the PRC to control. PLA strategists "increasingly reference undersea cables as a vulnerability to be protected, a tool to be exploited for intelligence purposes, and a possible target of offensive action against adversary infrastructure."[25] Beyond developing dual-use technology like deep-sea mining vessels to target its adversaries' undersea cables,[26] the PRC gains a further advantage by designing and building its own cables along the Belt and Road. In the last decade, the Chinese company HMN Technologies, formerly Huawei Marine Networks, has completed 108 undersea cable projects, laying down more than 60,000 kilometers of cable.[27] As the builder of these networks, HMN Technologies, which is alleged to have close ties to the Chinese government, is well-positioned to insert remote surveillance equipment into them, potentially exposing massive amounts of data to the PRC.

A similar risk applies to Chinese telecommunications infrastructure disseminated across the Belt and Road. In many developing markets, the appeal of low-cost Chinese networks, made possible by financing from Chinese national banks, outweighs the fear that Beijing could exploit them. As of April 2019, Chinese companies were involved in 52 5G initiatives across 34 countries, giving Beijing the ability to set technical standards, establish important control points over the equipment, and shape future technology in participating countries.[28]

Beijing also exports surveillance and data-collection technologies through its smart city projects. The PRC introduced the idea of smart cities in 2012, launching hundreds of pilot projects across the country. By 2019, China had piloted 749 domestic smart cities, with leading Chinese firms Alibaba, Huawei, and ZTE supplying the systems for city management: CCTV surveillance systems, traffic management systems, emergency response services, waste management systems, and the data platforms that connect them.[29] Since testing these systems at home, China has rolled them out in more than 200 cities around the world. These projects matter for two reasons. First, by

embedding Chinese systems in foreign cities, Chinese companies get access to the information that those systems collect. Second, Beijing is exporting its own architecture for information control, equipping governments along the Belt and Road with the tools and expertise to restrict their domestic information spaces as China does.

Finally, artificial intelligence and big data projects increasingly dominate Beijing's BRI agenda. For developing countries that see AI as an avenue toward economic growth and national development, China offers an enticing path forward: low-cost hardware, cloud platforms, and project financing, all in one package.[30] While BRI nations benefit from the simplicity of cloud services, data analytics, and AI running through a single platform, Beijing is the real winner. That is because concentrating critical functions in a single platform deepens dependence on Chinese providers and exposes data to Beijing's strategic use—including to train Chinese AI models.

The effects of this technological proliferation can be felt in multiple global regions. In the Middle East, the past half-decade has seen a ballooning of China's tech trade—with companies like Huawei, which are viewed with suspicion in the West, now ubiquitous throughout the region.[31] In the Western Hemisphere, Chinese systems are gaining similar traction; at least 13 Latin American countries use or are planning to use Huawei equipment in 5G networks, and Huawei currently operates data centers in five Latin American countries.[32] And in Africa, Huawei is credited with constructing 50 percent of Africa's 3G and 70 percent of its 4G networks; projects which are predominantly financed through Chinese loans.[33]

TARGETING TAIWAN

The principal foreign target of Chinese propaganda and disinformation is undoubtedly Taiwan, "reunification" with which has become a core tenet of Xi Jinping's foreign policy since his assumption of power in 2012. According to democracy research organization V-Dem, Taiwan has been the society in the world most heavily targeted by foreign disinformation for more than a decade.[34] Indeed, in its most recent report on Chinese informational activities against the island, Taiwan's National Security Bureau (NSB) outlined that the PRC has been waging "comprehensive cognitive warfare against Taiwan through its party, state, and military systems." In 2025 alone, that took the form of more than 2.3 million pieces of disinformation, up from approximately 2.16 million in 2024. The number of inauthentic accounts identified in connection with these activities likewise surged, from just over 28,000 in 2024 to more than 45,000 last year—an increase of more than 60 percent.[35]

The scope of this campaign is expansive. According to the NSB, Beijing has mobilized an array of government agencies, military units, and technology companies to manipulate public perceptions on the island. These activities encompass the creation of fictitious news websites, the operation of online content farms, and the deployment of automated social media accounts to amplify narratives preferred by the PRC. Chinese information operations have also increasingly incorporated artificial intelligence, including automated video production and sophisticated audience targeting.

The efforts are geared toward several interrelated objectives. The first is to deepen political and social divisions within Taiwan, thereby undermining domestic cohesion there. The second is to weaken public confidence in the island's military and its capacity to withstand Chinese coercion. The third is to cultivate doubts about the reliability of the United States and other potential Taiwanese security partners, particularly their willingness to intervene in the event of a cross-Strait crisis. Finally, Beijing seeks to increase public acceptance of its preferred political outcome: Taiwan's eventual absorption into the PRC.[36]

Moreover, according to officials and experts in Taipei, the PRC's informational assault is both changing and intensifying. As of last Fall, Chinese messaging was focused on three distinct narratives in its messaging relating to the island. These narratives, cumulatively known as the "Three Anniversaries Campaign," represent an effort to weaponize the historical commemoration of three specific anniversaries to advance the PRC's claims of sovereignty. The first relates to the 80th anniversary of the victory of China's "war of resistance" against Japan during World War II. The second commemorates the 80th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. The third messaging line highlights the 80th anniversary of the island's "retrocession" (restoration) to mainland China following World War II. According to Taiwanese officials, the PRC has weaponized these narratives—via

social media, through television broadcasts, and by other means—in an effort to reshape historical memory, posit the island as an indispensable part of the PRC, and undermine the legitimacy of any suggestion that it should be independent.[37]

UNDERMINING THE U.S. POLITICAL SYSTEM

While Taiwan may be the principal target of Chinese disinformation, it is certainly not the only one. Increasingly, the United States has become a focus of PRC information operations as well. Similar to its objectives against Taiwan, Beijing seeks to deepen existing social and political divisions within the United States, erode public confidence in democratic institutions, and shape policy debates in China's favor.

A prominent example is "Spamouflage" (also referred to as "Dragonbridge"): a network of inauthentic accounts run by Chinese state-linked actors that have flooded social media platforms with pro-Chinese, anti-American rhetoric in recent years.[38] These accounts are known to have been active across more than 40 online platforms since at least 2017.[39] Early on, Spamouflage content focused on general criticisms of the American political system and policies. Over time, however, its tactics became more sophisticated. Leading up to the 2022 midterm elections, Spamouflage accounts began targeting American voters directly, mass-producing content that attacked both Democratic and Republican candidates, sowed doubt about the legitimacy of the U.S. electoral process, and amplified divisive narratives on sensitive topics like gun control, racial inequality, and drug abuse.[40] By the 2024 election cycle, Spamouflage was singling out individual lawmakers viewed as hostile to China. For example, Alabama Representative Barry Moore, who had supported sanctions against Chinese officials, became the subject of a coordinated campaign that incorrectly claimed he was Jewish in order to then spread antisemitic tropes about him.[41]

In addition to producing more targeted content, Spamouflage tactics have advanced to impersonating American voters themselves. In 2024, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue identified four accounts linked to Spamouflage posing as supporters of Donald Trump and the MAGA movement, using the accounts to spread conspiracies like election fraud and QAnon.[42] Developed personas of this nature are less likely to be dismissed as spam. Instead, they portray themselves as real Americans weighing in on issues that matter most to U.S. voters, making their messaging far more persuasive and harder to detect as fraudulent. Artificial intelligence has helped amplify these efforts further. Spamouflage operators have reportedly used OpenAI models to debug code for a website targeting Chinese dissidents, analyze social media posts, and to research U.S. news and current events. Generative AI tools have also been used to produce realistic audio, video, and images impersonating U.S. political figures.[43]

By polluting the U.S. information space with such content, Beijing does more than amplify its own messaging. It degrades Americans' ability to distinguish genuine online discourse from foreign attempts to drive political division, thereby eroding the ability of the U.S. public to reach consensus on issues that matter.

NEW FRONTIERS

At the same time, Beijing continues to look for ways to extend its control over information beyond its borders, with space-based internet emerging as a significant focus. The advent of Starlink and the growing potential for low Earth orbit satellite constellations to connect censored or isolated populations to the global internet has highlighted to Beijing a potential challenge to its objective of digital control and media manipulation. At the same time, however, it has also suggested a potential new avenue of strategic influence—one the PRC has wasted no time in exploiting.

In 2024, China's state-backed Qianfan constellation launched its first batch of broadband internet satellites into low Earth orbit.[44] Qianfan is one of three planned Chinese mega-constellations, aiming to put 14,000 satellites into orbit in the coming years.[45] Other players in this space include the China Satellite Network Group, which is aiming to deploy 13,000 satellites,[46] and the Landspace corporation, which plans to launch 10,000 of its own.[47]

Cumulatively, these projects reflect China's broader ambition to become the dominant power in space.[48] Strategically, however, they serve an additional purpose. Such capabilities, when robustly deployed, have the potential to establish the PRC as the information supplier of choice to emerging media markets and developing nations.

In this context, Africa looms large. The continent boasts the world's youngest population, and its fastest

growing (projected to hit 2.5 billion inhabitants from its current total of 1.3 billion by mid-century). African internet connectivity, however, has lagged far behind. As of 2024, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimated that just 38 percent of Africa's population was using the internet, making it the world's least-connected region.[49] But that state-of-affairs is changing rapidly, and international initiatives have set a goal of universal access to broadband connectivity in Africa by 2030.[50] When paired with the continent's explosive population growth, this suggests Africa's information market will grow by half-a-billion or more new users over the next quarter-century. Should Beijing's satellite constellations serve as the means by which those new users come online, China will have embedded itself in Africa's informational infrastructure, leaving the U.S. with far less room to help shape the continent's emerging media sphere or champion access to truthful information.

COMPETING INFORMATIONALLY WITH CHINA

In the Chinese conception, information has clearly emerged as a discrete domain of conflict and a key arena for the advancement of its foreign policy objectives. The initiatives outlined above have the potential to dramatically boost China's geopolitical standing and influence, and do so at the expense of the United States and the broader West.

As yet, the United States has not formulated a cogent response to China's informational activities. To the contrary, recent years have seen a significant contraction of American international informational activities, even as those of its principal strategic competitor have continued to grow. The result is a widening disparity between the importance Beijing attaches to the information domain and the resources and attention that Washington devotes to it. Closing that gap will require a fundamental rethinking of how the United States approaches the informational component of competition with China, including:

Rebuild America's capacity to communicate with global publics. International broadcasting and public diplomacy have historically served as important instruments of U.S. national power. However, the past two years have seen the Trump administration attempt to eliminate funding for the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) as part of its efforts to shrink the size and functions of the federal government. In early 2026, Congress asserted its prerogatives and restored funding for the U.S. informational apparatus. However, it did so at more modest levels: the FY2027 budget passed by Congress includes an appropriation of $652.7 million for USAGM, including $643 million for international broadcasting operations—a more than 20 percent reduction over previous funding levels.[51] The result is that U.S. informational capabilities are, at present, woefully inadequate to the scope and scale of the Chinese challenge.

Recognize that information competition is not simply a contest over narratives. Increasingly, it is also a struggle over the technological infrastructure through which information flows. China's extensive investments in enabling technologies (like undersea cables and space-based internet) are creating new forms of dependency among foreign nations, with profound geopolitical implications. Countering this trend will require Washington to work closely with allied governments and the private sector to offer credible, affordable alternatives to Chinese technology.

Devote greater attention to emerging information markets in the developing world. Africa, in particular, presents an enormous strategic opportunity in this regard—provided the United States can capture "first mover advantage" in terms of helping to determine the information environment available to the continent's growing population. If it does not, however, it can expect for this emerging audience to be captured by Chinese narratives, technology, and its worldview.

Defend the American information space. In addition to combatting Chinese influence operations abroad, Washington must respond to those the PRC is carrying out on the home front as well. Federal mechanisms designed to track such activity have been eroded in recent years, including through the dismantlement of key offices like the FBI's Foreign Influence Task Force, the State Department's dedicated counter-disinformation office, the Global Engagement Center, and the ODNI's Foreign Malign Influence Center. The U.S. government should focus on rebuilding that capacity with a narrower scope. New mechanisms can focus on identifying foreign state-run disinformation campaigns and exposing them publicly, in partnership with social media platforms and AI developers, while steering clear of the domestic censorship concerns that contributed to the dissolution of their predecessors.

Fundamentally, China has come to understand that the ability to shape information, and control the technology and systems through which it flows, has become essential to sustained global influence. Unless the United States begins to similarly treat the information domain as a central arena of strategic competition, it risks being eclipsed by China's manipulation of it.

ENDNOTES

1. The Trump administration's December 2017 *National Security Strategy* formally identifies China as a "revisionist power" and identifies "great power competition" with China as well as Russia as a central pillar of the contemporary international environment. The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.
2. See, for instance, Christopher S. Chivvis and Senkai Hsia, I*mplementing the Biden Administration's China Strategy* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2026), https://assets.carnegieendowment.org/files/Chivvis_US-China-202603.pdf.
3. As defined in Amy McAuliffe and James Mulvenon, "A Widening Challenge in Cyberspace," *Statecraft & Strategy* iss. III, Fall 2026, https://www.statecraftandstrategy.com/chinas-expanding-reach/a-widening-chinese-challenge-in-cyberspace/.
4. Dean Cheng, Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 17, 2022, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-02/Dean_Cheng_Testimony.pdf.
5. Taylor Fravel, "Shifts in Warfare and Party Unity: Explaining China's Changes in Military Strategy," *International Security* 42, no. 3 (2018): 73.
6. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare: China's Master Plan to Destroy America* (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999), https://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf.
7. Cheng, Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 17, 2022.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibidem.
10. Yuan Wenxian, ed., "Lectures on Joint Campaign Operations," National Defense University Press, November 2009, 98, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2021-10-12%20Lectures%20on%20Joint%20Campaign%20Information%20Operations.pdf.
11. Ibid., 100.
12. Ibidem.
13. Wenxian, "Lectures on Joint Campaign Operations," 101.
14. Ibid., 102.
15. Ibidem.
16. David Bandurski, "The Fable of the Master Storyteller," China Media Project, September 29, 2017, https://chinamediaproject.org/2017/09/29/the-fable-of-the-master-storyteller/.
17. International Department, Central Committee of CPC, "Xi Jinping Emphasized during the 12th Collective Study Session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee: Building a Socialist Cultural Power Requires Focusing on Enhancing the Country's Soft Power," December 31, 2013, https://www.idcpc.org.cn/zgzc/zyhy/201912/t20191216_105914.html.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibidem.
20. Scott W. Harold, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Jeffrey W. Hornung, *Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2021), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4300/RR4373z3/RAND_RR4373z3.pdf.
21. Author's conversations with U.S. officials, May-August 2025.
22. Dustin Volz and Michael Gordan, "China Is Investing Billions in Global Disinformation Campaign, U.S. Says," *Wall Street Journal*, September 28, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/world/china/china-is-investing-billions-in-global-disinformation-campaign-u-s-says-88740b85.
23. Cyberspace Administration of China, Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, "Internet Information Service Algorithm Recommendation Management Regulations," January 4, 2022, https://www.cac.gov.cn/2022-01/04/c_1642894606364259.htm.
24. Yuyu Chen and David Y. Yang, "The Impact of Media Censorship: 1984 or Brave New World?" *American Economic Review* 109, no. 6, 2019, https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/aer.20171765.
25. Andrew Yeh et al., "China's Gray Zone Threats to Trans-Pacific Undersea Cables," China Strategic Risks Institute, September 2026, https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-gray-zone-threats-trans-pacific-undersea-cables.
26. Ibid.
27. Sadia Rahman, "The Cable Ties to China's Digital Silk Road," The Lowy Institute, April 29, 2024, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/cable-ties-china-s-digital-silk-road.
28. "Mapping China's Tech Giants," The

Australian Strategic Policy Institute, April 18, 2019, https://www.aspi.org.au/report/mapping-chinas-tech-giants/.

29. Sameer Patil and Prithvi Gupta, "The Digital Silk Road and Smart City Networks in the Indo-Pacific: A Primer," Observer Research Foundation, September 8, 2025, https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-digital-silk-road-and-smart-city-networks-in-the-indo-pacific-a-primer.
30. Hao Nan, "China's Second Belt and Road May Be Built On AI," *ThinkChina*, October 4, 2026, https://www.thinkchina.sg/technology/chinas-second-belt-and-road-may-be-built-ai.
31. Min Mitchell, "How China is Reshaping the Greater Middle East," *Statecraft & Strategy* iss. III, Fall 2026, https://www.statecraftandstrategy.com/chinas-expanding-reach/how-china-is-reshaping-the-greater-middle-east/.
32. Maria Zuppello, "China's AI Expansion in Latin America: Security Risks," Diálogo Américas, September 29, 2026, https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/chinas-ai-expansion-in-latin-america-security-risks/.
33. Juan Vázquez Rojo, "China's Technological Footprint in Africa: A Patent Network Analysis," *South African Journal of Business Management* 55, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v55i1.4331.
34. See, for instance, Hennie Refstad Steinveg, "Foreign Interference Around Elections," V-Dem, January 26, 2024, https://v-dem.net/weekly_graph/foreign-interference-around-elections.
35. National Security Bureau of the Republic of China, *Analysis of China's Cognitive Warfare Tactics against Taiwan in 2025*, January 2026, https://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/library/reports/2026/2025-china-cognitive-warfare-against-taiwan_roc-nsb_20260211.pdf.
36. Ibid.
37. Author's conversations, Taipei, Taiwan, November 2025.
38. Ben Nimmo, "Adversarial Threat Report," Meta, August 2023, https://transparency.meta.com/sr/Q2-2023-Adversarial-threat-report.
39. "The #Americans: Chinese State-Linked Influence Operation Spamouflage Masquerades as U.S. Voters Push Divisive Online Narratives Ahead of 2024 Election," *Graphika*, September 3, 2024, https://www.graphika.com/reports/the-americans, 2.
40. Ibid.
41. Wenhao Ma, "China-Connected Spamouflage Networks Spread Antisemitic Disinformation," *Voice of America*, October 4, 2024, https://www.voanews.com/a/china-connected-spamouflage-networks-spread-antisemitic-disinformation/7811033.html.
42. Elise Thomas, "Pro-CCP Spamouflage Campaign Experiments with New Tactics Targeting the US," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, April 1, 2024, https://www.isdglobal.org/digital-dispatch/pro-ccp-spamouflage-campaign-experiments-with-new-tactics-targeting-the-us/.
43. Shannon Bond, "In a First, OpenAI Removes Influence Operations Tied to Russia, China and Israel," NPR, May 31, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/05/30/g-s1-1670/openai-influence-operations-china-russia-israel.
44. Ilan Berman, "The Fight for Informational Freedom Is Moving to Space," *Newsweek*, September 4, 2024, https://www.newsweek.com/fight-informational-freedom-moving-space-opinion-1948104.
45. Simone McCarthy, "China Launches Satellites to Rival SpaceX's Starlink in Boost for Its Space Ambitions," *CNN*, August 9, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/08/09/china/china-satellite-qianfan-g60-starlink-intl-hnk/index.html.
46. Stephen Chen, "China to Launch Nearly 13,000 Satellites to 'suppress' Starlink: Researchers," South China Morning Post, February 24, 2023, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3211438/china-aims-launch-nearly-13000-satellites-suppress-elon-musks-starlink-researchers-say.
47. Eduardo Baptista, "China's Landspace Gears up to Take on Elon Musk and SpaceX," Reuters, December 29, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/chinas-landspace-gears-up-take-elon-musk-spacex-2025-12-29/.
48. On Chinese space strategy, see Namrata Goswami, "Beijing Reaches for the Stars," *Statecraft & Strategy* iss. III, Fall 2026, https://www.statecraftandstrategy.com/chinas-expanding-reach/beijing-reaches-for-the-stars/.
49. "Africa's Internet use doubles in decade despite high costs (report)," Ecofin Agency, February 27, 2024, https://www.ecofinagency.com/telecom/2702-45230-africas-internet-use-doubles-in-decade-despite-high-costs-report.
50. Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, "Connecting Africa Through BroadBand: A Strategy for Doubling Connecting by 2021 and Reaching Universal Access by 2030," The World Bank, October 2019, https://broadbandcommission.org/Documents/working-groups/DigitalMoonshotforAfrica_Report.pdf.
51. "National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs: FY2027 Budget and Appropriations," Congressional Research Service Report, October 13, 2026, https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R48956.html.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY PAPER

ABOUT THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY PROJECT

Official outreach to foreign publics represents one of the most potent instruments of "soft power" available to the United States. Yet U.S. public diplomacy has eroded significantly since its heyday at the height of the Cold War, when American broadcasts and messaging engaged foreign publics behind the Iron Curtain and played an integral role in shaping the ideas that brought down the Soviet bloc. Through a combination of bureaucratic reshuffling and official neglect, the post-Cold War era has seen an erosion of the efficiency, strategic vision, and impact of American strategic communications. Rebuilding the vibrancy, impact, and persuasive potential of U.S. broadcasting is critical to ensuring the resonance of our ideas and values in today's increasingly crowded and contested information space. The American Foreign Policy Council's Future of Public Diplomacy Project is designed to elevate the profile of public diplomacy in the U.S. public policy debate, as well as to highlight to policymakers and the general public the various contemporary challenges now confronting American outreach.

THE AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

For more than four decades, AFPC has played an essential role in the U.S. foreign policy debate. Founded in 1982, AFPC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to bringing information to those who make or influence the foreign policy of the United States and to assisting world leaders with building democracies and market economies.

AFPC is widely recognized as a source of timely, insightful analysis on issues of foreign policy, and works closely with members of Congress, the Executive Branch and the policymaking community. It is staffed by noted specialists in foreign and defense policy, and serves as a valuable resource to officials in the highest levels of government.

AFPC MISSION STATEMENT

The American Foreign Policy Council seeks to advance the security and prosperity of the United States by:

1. Providing primary source information, as well as policy options, to persons and organizations who make or influence the national security and foreign policies of the United States;

2. Arranging meetings and facilitating dialogue between American Statesmen and their counterparts in other countries; and

3. Fostering the acceptance and development of representative institutions and free market economies throughout the world in a manner consistent with the Constitution, the national interest, and the values of the United States.

The American Foreign Policy Council

509 C Street NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 543-1006
Fax: (202) 543-1007
www.afpc.org

Mr. Herman Pirchner, Jr.
President

Mr. Ilan Berman
Senior Vice President

Mr. Richard M. Harrison
Vice President of Operations and Director of Defense Technology Programs

Mrs. Annie Swingen
Vice President for External Relations

Dr. S. Frederick Starr
Distinguished Fellow for Eurasia and Chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute

Dr. Svante E. Cornell
Senior Fellow for Eurasia and Director of Research & Publications of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute

Ms. Laura Linderman
Senior Fellow for Eurasia and Director of Programs of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute

Ms. Anna Harvey
Research Fellow and Program Officer

Ms. Calla O'Neil
Research Fellow and Program Officer

Mr. Alexander John Paul Lutz
Research Fellow and Program Officer

BOARD OF ADVISORS

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky, PhD.
Hon. Christopher Ford, PhD.
Amb. James S. Gilmore, III
Hon. Newt Gingrich
Hon. Michelle S. Giuda
Sen. Robert Kasten, Jr.
Hon. Ellen E. McCarthy
Amb. Richard McCormack
Gov. Thomas J. Ridge
Dr. William Schneider, Jr.
Hon. Manisha Singh
Hon. Dov Zakheim