
COVID Information Warfare and the Future of Great Power Competition

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic has ushered in a golden age of information warfare. Russia and China—the two most prominent authoritarian regimes contraposing the liberal, rule-based international order the West has strived to build and promote—have prospered most during the current COVID crisis. We look at the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) and Kremlin’s key COVID information warfare characteristics and explore how they are reshaping Great Power competition. We conclude with some suggestions regarding resilience and a joint counterstrategy.

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COVID-19 AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION

COVID-19 (or coronavirus) has ushered in a new era of heightened competition among major powers. The pandemic's impact has far exceeded national security and public health. In

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One of the key components of the CCP's strategy concerns operations in the information sphere, per the so-called "Three Warfares"² which is discussed later in the article. Below the threshold of armed conflict and taking place in the 'grey zone', such information operations manifest as either influence operations and/or 'strategic preconditioning'³ for any later action, both with and without the use of force.

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INFORMATION WARFARE DURING COVID-19

Great Power competition of today is evident in Western relations with both the Kremlin and the CCP. The CCP appears determined to shape the world to a strategic vision where it will safeguard its economic, strategic, and security interests in Asia, the Pacific, Europe, and the Arctic for generations to come.⁴ Russia—its strategic partner—aims to rebuild Russia as a 'Great Power' and player on the international scene with twin foci on Europe and on where opportunities may arise for it to weaken Western influence and interests. It should be noted that both the Kremlin and the CCP are using concepts which we describe as either *hybrid warfare* and/or *grey-zone warfare*, examples of which are best provided by contemporary Russian warfare approaches.⁵

Responding to the use of irregular strategies employed by the CCP and the Kremlin, the U.S. has included the concept of Great Power competition in its national security strategy. Great Power competition entails the distribution of relative gains with no finite terminal objectives. In this

context, it is not hard to see how information warfare plays a critical role in shaping how the great powers are competing in key issue areas where major powers use weaponized narratives to sow internal discord and distrust,⁶ rendering their adversaries unable to focus on external threats. In other words, the information environment has thus become one of the main battle spaces of Great Power competition.

The need to approach information warfare from a full-spectrum perspective is more acute than ever. While disinformation mitigation is a critical component of information statecraft, it is *only* a necessary component, not the sufficient whole. Both revisionist states use digital media platforms and other information warfare capabilities not only to consolidate their authoritarian rule, but also to undermine and disrupt the liberal international order that the United States and its allies have buttressed.⁷ Drawing on this inspiration, other autocrats are emulating the CCP and the Kremlin to exploit the information environment and undermine the strategic interests of the United States.⁸

Authoritarian regimes further seem determined to weaponize digital media and information technology from domestic population control mechanisms to foreign policy tools.⁹ Emulating the Kremlin, the CCP seems poised to weaponize the cyber domain, as well as publicly available information (PAI) as tools of disruption and coercion.¹⁰ For example, the CCP has aggressively promoted patently false narratives about the origin of the coronavirus. In addition, it has actively promoted the Party's public health 'leadership' using automated accounts, bots, and trolls, despite numerous frauds and defects noticed in several countries.¹¹ The CCP's COVID aid to other countries has further been riddled with frauds, to say nothing of its explicit use for propaganda purposes.¹² Similarly, the Kremlin is exploiting the pandemic to highlight how the European Union is failing its mandates.¹³ While this is consistent with the Kremlin's information operations as we saw in the 2016 election, it has palpably escalated its propaganda efforts during the COVID pandemic by intentionally propping up radical right conversations that promote the dissolution of the EU.¹⁴

THE CCP'S INFORMATION WARFARE DOCTRINE

Today, the CCP is focusing on the 'cognitive' domain of information operations and aims to *precondition* the political, strategic, operational, and tactical arenas in the short and long run. It achieves its foreign policy and military goals through evolving strategies such as the introduction of propaganda at horizontal and vertical levels and the maintenance of a very reliable

and flexible apparatus in and outside of China.¹⁵ It emphasizes ‘influence operations,’ which are materialized in the ‘Three Warfares’¹⁶ (*san zhong zhanfa*). In 2003, the CCP Central Committee and the Central Military Commission (CMC) approved the concept of the Three Warfares,¹⁷ which consists of:

Public Opinion—which intends to influence internal and external public opinion to project a good image and reputation of China and its interests;

Psychological Warfare—which seeks to undermine an enemy’s ability to conduct combat operations by deterring and demoralizing enemy military personnel, as well as supporting civilian populations; and

Legal Warfare—which uses national and international law to claim China’s legal high ground, interests, and build international support to precondition and change public international law in the benefit of China’s interests.

Applied to the current COVID crisis, the CCP is taking the opportunity to further its interests, exploiting the Three Warfares, the economic Belt and Road Initiative, and aid programs to increase influence over other nations, especially those in the Asia-Pacific.¹⁸ The CCP is also moving

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ahead to shore up long-held objectives, including Hong Kong,¹⁹ the South China Sea,²⁰ and Taiwan.²¹ However, the coronavirus pandemic has also demonstrated the limits of the Three Warfares, with widespread disbelief of the Chinese propaganda offering alternative views of the coronavirus’ origin. This has led to a Russian-inspired shift of Chinese disinformation from overt to covert.²² We have also witnessed an increasing tendency by the CCP to counter critical nations with informa-

tion warfare, augmented with economic coercion, notably with acts against Australian imports.²³ In sum, Beijing’s information warfare is becoming increasingly sophisticated, powered by the use of artificial intelligence and aimed at overall ‘thought management’.²⁴

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF COVID INFORMATION WARFARE CONDUCTED BY THE CCP AND THE KREMLIN

We define disinformation, as a subset of misinformation, as false or misleading information that is spread deliberately to deceive. It entails three components to unpack. First, agency as a part of a strategy. Disinformation is intentional where misinformation can be incidental or unwitting. Second, disinformation requires mechanisms to propagate. Intentionally designed disruptive narratives cannot achieve intended effects unless they reach larger audiences. Simply put, disinformation must spread to work. Third, unlike misinformation, disinformation has discernable objectives. These objectives range from obfuscation to distrust, disruption, and destabilization.

Of note, the trend of disinformation has not changed much as its notion originated from the Russian word *dezinformatsiya* as a component of Soviet 'active measures' at the onset of the Cold War. However, what is different during the COVID pandemic is the pace of disinformation propagation. This accelerated pace appears to have three broad characteristics. First, we notice an elevated level of politicized content. This is the first global crisis where major powers are all messaging to promote and advance their parochial interests, whether because of nationalism arising from the pandemic threat, or because of the global competition each power believes is critical to secure those interests. While international terrorism was the last global issue major powers messaged on, most of the actual acts of terrorism have remained localized, regional, or were not located in the West at all,²⁵ with only a few exceptions.

Second, we note elevated levels of artificial amplification,²⁶ employed by the CCP and the Kremlin. They appear to exploit bots, trolls, and syndicated news outlets that can propagate their narratives with much more haste than fact-checkers could anticipate. Third, we are also alarmed by an implicit or tacit convergence of like-minded actors along ideological lines, which appears to mirror the current political decoupling we see around the globe. It appears Larry Diamond's warnings about illiberal winds²⁷ at least partially prophesied their number during the COVID pandemic.

We need to refocus on the strategic context within which we see the rapid propagation of disinformation. Intensity of disinformation competition will stem from the actual competition among major powers. We must also ask how we increase awareness of this competition in order to become more resilient to its negative effects.

What is the content our adversaries are promoting when talking about the pandemic? What are the key themes of strategic disinformation?

What are the ‘failures’ and inherent weaknesses of democratic institutions and societies dealing with the pandemic and its potential for exploitation for strategic goals? How can these failures across FVEY political, military, economic, social, infrastructure, and information domains be exploited by this tactic through the use of diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and legal (DIMEFIL) strategy?

We must treat disinformation as a full-spectrum problem set. We must go beyond mitigation, become more proactive, and move from passive defense to active defense in these domains. We must promote public-private partnerships in the U.S. and among its partners to harvest and integrate the best solutions in support of influence competition and strategic communication. These solutions, in turn, will viably support diplomacy—as highlighted by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s public support for Australia as a strategic partner²⁸—and will offer concrete economic steps such as funding of vaccines research at home and in collaboration with partner nations.²⁹

Countering the information warfare threat from our adversaries must account for the vulnerabilities caused by the current pandemic and its human and economic cost. It must also aim to actively contain and push back on CCP’s plan for a new Global Order.³⁰ Resembling our generation’s greatest threat, we need to ensure that our nations are not vulnerable to economic coercion and political interference by the CCP. Our future relations with the PRC must come from a position of unity and strength³¹ and not one of weakness. *f*

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