

# The Strategic Deployments of China's Cognitive Warfare Under Xi Jinping

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## **Abstract**

Judging by military expenditure, China currently ranks second in the world, right after the United States. It is also the second-largest economy by nominal GDP. Its ambition to become a key player and rule maker in the international system is obvious, and its dream of replacing the U.S. hegemon and countering Western democracies is China's next goal. However, since the existing hegemon, the United States, and China are both nuclear powers, a direct military confrontation is certainly not a direction both sides envision. Therefore, to manipulate the public in the U.S., Taiwan (its top foreign policy priority) and Western societies, China urgently needs an alternative mean to generate a pro-China environment and thereby pave its road to hegemony. The solution to this puzzle is to utilize cognitive warfare to create a benign image of China and to further stimulate domestic problems among targeted societies. This paper reviews the strategic deployments of China's cognitive warfare and discusses how China free rides freedom of speech and media to wage cognitive warfare among those countries. It contends that the current deployment of cognitive warfare has been half successful, with more backfiring likely, which will nullify years of efforts in this conduct.

**Keywords:** Cognitive Warfare, Disinformation, Cyber Espionage, Freedom of Speech and Press, China

## **I. Introduction**

Competition among states evolved dramatically after globalization entered a new phase in the 1990s and the Internet became widely accessible in the 2000s. In the past, states generally competed over their military and economic capabilities to

determine which states had more influence in the world system. Today, international competition is not just about guns and butter; other forms of international competition have emerged, such as information warfare.

As the spread of information increases exponentially in speed and quantity, some authoritarian states have started to disseminate information that favors their values among established democracies. Russia and China are the cases discussed here. In particular, for China — the second-largest military power by military expenditure and the second-largest economy — its goal of replacing the current hegemon, the United States, has never been clearer than it is under Xi Jinping. To do so, China needs to create an environment where citizens in other countries with distinct values are willing to accept such a hegemonic transition.

Creating a China-welcoming, or perhaps China-friendly, information environment globally is not the only goal of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Due to the massive amount of information being digitalized and stored in either cloud-based servers or semi-private servers with Internet access possibilities, China can also extract valuable information, including classified intelligence details and technological patents, through cyber espionage. This also includes espionage in the fields of national defense and military intelligence. The host countries/governments/entities oftentimes are vulnerable because the attacks come from a foreign country (e.g., China) out of their own jurisdictions. China also protects the perpetrators of those attacks, and in fact, many of them are hired by the CCP.

The threat of China's cognitive warfare is widespread for two reasons. First, while creating an information environment that favors the CCP seems to be a neutral objective, something that most countries also seek, it is important to emphasize that China is not a democratic country and that it constantly violates human rights. The information narrative it creates and disseminates is therefore in conflict with the values and norms of democratic societies. In particular, the way the CCP interprets its history and current events intends to alter how democratic citizens think about the democratic system and its practices. Moreover, to suffocate the government legitimacy of other democratic states, misinformation and disinformation are often spread in those countries through various online platforms. This conduct further intends to divide and cause chaos in other countries.

Second, the cyber-espionage conducted by the CCP creates concerns over information privacy and how the extracted information is intended to be used. Such attacks are not limited to extracting strategic information that China would like to acquire, but also generate false information to undermine the harmony of the attacked society. For example, Chinese cyber attacks on the Presidential Office in Taiwan aimed to create disinformation accusing the current president, Tsai Ing-wen, of corruption, which was later proved to be fabricated information.<sup>1</sup> Of course, this is not the only incident we have witnessed.

This paper reviews the strategic deployments of China's cognitive warfare under Xi Jinping. It first discusses the awareness of China's cognitive warfare by Western societies through the discourse of "sharp power." It then reviews China's cognitive warfare and its global implementations in terms of the tools employed. After that, it reviews the outcomes of China's cognitive warfare and whether any of its intended goals have been achieved. Lastly, it provides concluding remarks and elaborates on how to counter such warfare.

## II. From Soft Power to Sharp Power

For years, China has engaged in cognitive warfare against the Western world, especially against established democracies. In 2017, the National Endowment for Democracy in the United States coined the term "sharp power" to describe such warfare through misinformation and disinformation.<sup>2</sup> Different from traditional soft power, where states utilize influence through media and cultural exchanges to generate a benign image of themselves, sharp power intends to pierce, penetrate, or perforate the information environments in the targeted countries. These regimes are not necessarily seeking to win hearts and minds, the common frame of reference for "soft power" efforts, but they are surely seeking to manage their target audiences by manipulating

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1. Joyce Huang, "China Using 'Cognitive Warfare' Against Taiwan, Observers Say," *Voice of America*, January 17, 2021, <[https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific\\_china-using-cognitive-warfare-against-taiwan-observers-say/6200837.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_china-using-cognitive-warfare-against-taiwan-observers-say/6200837.html)>.

2. Christopher Walker & Jessica Ludwig, "From 'Soft Power' to 'Sharp Power': Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World," December 5, 2017, *The National Endowment for Democracy*, <<https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence-forum-report/>>.

or poisoning the information that reaches them.<sup>3</sup> The goal is to further amplify the social divide in the targeted state instead of winning the hearts and minds of their citizens.

The report points out two notorious autocracies that have used sharp power for such purposes: China and Russia. Before we discuss the exact tools and weapons of sharp power and cognitive warfare in general, a clarification on the purpose of this initiative is in order. Otherwise, why would these two authoritarian countries largely differentiate their behavior from other nations in the world?

A simple answer to this question is that both Russia and China want to replace the U.S.-led hegemonic status and the associated global order. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has served as the sole hegemon that has dominated the global order and expanded its national interests in three categories – economic liberalization and globalization for its business sector, rule-based international organizations in solving state-to-state disputes, and promotion of democratic values since the democratic peace theory entails a more trouble-free world order if more countries adopt democratic systems and norms. As evident in the massive involvement in the United Nations and its subcommittees and democratization movements across various areas, including the U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States aims to create a world where its values and interests are ensured continued growth. As a result, if any rising powers want to climb to hegemonic status, they will inevitably be challengers to the United States.

Nevertheless, this does not imply that such a competition should be malicious. After World War I, the United States acquired hegemonic status from the dominant powers at that time. These states, such as Great Britain and other European states, were mostly comfortable transferring their leading role to the United States since they held similar political structures and values. As a leading military authoritarian state that lost its lead after the Cold War, Russia has struggled to develop its economic capability and seek stability within its territory. Of course, Russia is still considered a potential competitor to the U.S., but the relative gap between the U.S. and Russia has been growing wider. Now, another autocracy with distinct political orientation

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3. Christopher Walker & Jessica Ludwig, “From ‘Soft Power’ to ‘Sharp Power’: Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World,” p. 13.

and values has emerged since the 1970s: China.

China was a strategic ally of the United States during the Cold War. As the number one leading foreign policy priority of the United States during the Cold War was to counter the influence of the Soviet Union and communism, the Soviet Union-China split in the 1960s provided the opportunity for the United States to seek possibilities of cooperation with China, as evident in the Ping Pong diplomacy in the 1970s and *United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758* shifting the representation of “China” from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1971, followed by the Three Joint Communiqués between the United States and China and the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1979. After the economic reforms launched in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping, China gradually joined the global economy in the 1980s and 1990s and underwent a sharp rise starting in the early 2000s after the United States assisted it in joining the World Trade Organization (WTO).

These efforts were not designed to widen the ideological gap between China and the United States; instead, the United States expected that China would eventually be a responsible and accountable stakeholder. Its authoritarian system and practices would evolve into democratic ones, perhaps similar to Taiwan. Scholars and policymakers in Washington, D.C., believed that the theory of modernization,<sup>4</sup> where economic development would bring democratic reform, could apply to China. Therefore, allowing China to liberalize its economy and providing opportunities for it to become the “world factory” given its industrial capability and comparative advantage through massive and cheap labor force was regarded as a plausible strategy, under the assumption that China would soon democratize/liberalize due to demand from its people. The outcome, however, was opposite to what the United States had hoped.

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4. For detail, see Zehra F. Arat, “Democracy and economic development: Modernization theory revisited,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1, October 1988, pp. 21-36; Ronald Inglehart & Christian Welzel, “How development leads to democracy: What we know about modernization,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 2, March/April 2009, pp. 33-48; Daron Acemoglu & James A. Robinson, “Beyond modernization theory,” *Annals of Comparative Democratization*, Vol. 16, No. 3, September 2018, pp. 26-31; Adam Przeworski & Fernando Limongi, “Modernization: Theories and facts,” *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 2, January 1997, pp. 155-183.

Since Xi came to power in 2012, China and the CCP have become more authoritarian, suppressing human rights and individual freedoms by expanding Internet censorship, creating concentration camps in Uygur areas, and silencing opposition voices in places like Hong Kong. In 2017, the Chinese constitution was amended, allowing Xi to rule for more than two terms. Power concentration in the CCP has reached a different level, and its economic and military capabilities, through years of efforts, are rapidly approaching those of the United States. Simply put, China has become a viable competitor of the United States and is willing to challenge the U.S. hegemonic status.

Domestically, Xi and the CCP revamped the education system and the information environment to boost nationalism in support of their legitimacy. But to further ensure its long-lasting rule, the government has to maintain its rise to the leading global position. That is, replacing the U.S. hegemonic status is the goal. To do so, Xi has initiated a number of global economic cooperation, including the Belt and Road Initiative, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and rapid financial and infrastructure investments in developing countries. These areas include Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. On the other hand, military modernization and advancements are other targets, where Chinese military expenditure now ranks number two in the world, behind the United States. The rapid enhancement of China's hard power is evident, but to expeditiously replace the United States, another strategy is to cause social divisions and chaos in the United States and to ensure that other leading Western powers would stand with China once the hegemonic transition happens. To achieve these objectives, China has turned to cognitive warfare.

In a nutshell, cognitive warfare is a tool to assist China in replacing the U.S. hegemonic status. In practice, it is also used to undermine the governing legitimacy and the social stability of the targeted countries, including the United States and Taiwan. The next section discusses the tools of China's cognitive warfare and its strategic deployments to demonstrate how cognitive warfare functions in the real world.

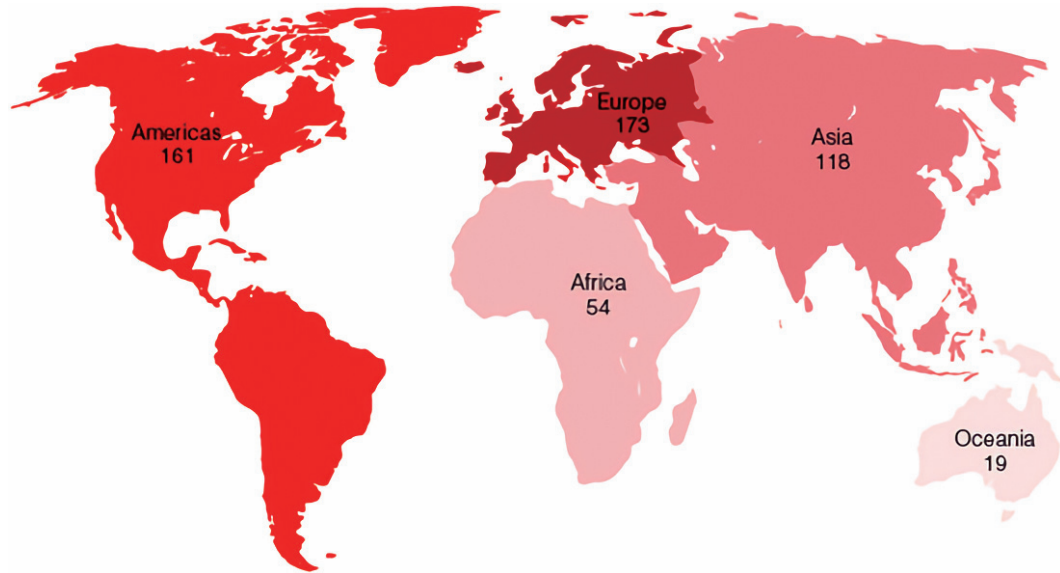
### **III. Strategic Deployments of China's Cognitive Warfare**

There are numerous pieces discussing China's cognitive warfare written in Chinese in Taiwan, as Taiwan is the principal target and victim of China's cognitive

warfare.<sup>5</sup> However, such discussions in English-language literature tend to be relatively scarce. One of the leading analyses by Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga published in *China Brief* provides a thorough examination of the concept and strategic deployment of China's cognitive warfare.<sup>6</sup> In addition, a collection of essays in the *Global Taiwan Brief* published by the Global Taiwan Institute also has an extensive discussion on this topic.<sup>7</sup> The present paper focuses on the most prominent expressions of China's cognitive warfare – disinformation and cyber espionage. Due to length limitations, it concentrates on two targeted countries, the United States and Taiwan. Walker and Ludwig's piece for the National Endowment for Democracy has a more extensive review of the sharp power practices in other societies, including European and Latin American countries.<sup>8</sup>

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5. 普麟,〈如何靠邏輯確認中共「認知作戰」真實存在?中國影響力的研究困境與道德難題〉, *The News Lens*, September 7, 2021, <<https://www.thenewslens.com/article/156054>>; 〈中共「認知作戰」!國安局上半年遭駭逾3萬次〉, *Yahoo News*, September 5, 2021, <<https://tw.news.yahoo.com/%E4%B8%AD%E5%85%B1-%E8%AA%8D%E7%9F%A5%E4%BD%9C%E6%88%B0-%E5%9C%8B%E5%AE%89%E5%B1%80%E4%B8%8A%E5%8D%8A%E5%B9%B4%E9%81%AD%E9%A7%AD%E9%80%BE3%E8%90%AC%E6%AC%A1-100000682.html>>; 〈台灣國防報告書指北京以「灰色地帶認知作戰」等手段企圖「不戰奪台」〉, *BBC*, November 15, 2021, <<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-59258262>>.
  6. Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, “Cognitive Domain Operations: The PLA's New Holistic Concept for Influence Operations,” *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 16, September 2019, *The Jamestown Foundation*, <<https://jamestown.org/program/cognitive-domain-operations-the-plas-new-holistic-concept-for-influence-operations/>>.
  7. Global Taiwan Institute, *Global Taiwan Brief*, Vol. 3, Issue 22, November 14, 2018, *Global Taiwan Institute*, <<https://globaltaiwan.org/2018/11/vol-3-issue-22/>>.
  8. Christopher Walker & Jessica Ludwig, “From ‘Soft Power’ to ‘Sharp Power’: Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World.”





**Figure 1. Confucius Institutes in the World by 2017**

Source: “Chart of the Day: The Growth of China’s Confucius Institutes” *Caixin Global*, November 30, 2018, <<https://www.caixinglobal.com/2018-11-30/chart-of-the-day-the-growth-of-chinas-confucius-institutes-101354066.html>>.

The first tool of China’s cognitive warfare is massive disinformation against targeted societies. There exist multiple venues to facilitate the spread and influence of disinformation. The first is the establishment of Confucius Institutes, starting in 2004, with an overwhelming number established worldwide (see Figure 1). Hiding as a Mandarin education institute promoting Mandarin learning in foreign countries, the Confucius Institutes embedded promotion of authoritarian values and the ideas of communism in the instructional materials for the purpose of undermining democratic values for citizens in the United States and Western democracies. The Confucius Institutes utilize incentives for foreign education entities, including public school districts, charter schools, private schools, and higher education institutes, to provide inexpensive Mandarin teaching support by subsidizing the establishment of Confucius Institutes and sending trained Mandarin instructors from China. The National Office trained these instructors for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language in China (abbreviated as Hanban) with the mission of spreading the information narrative in favor of the CCP.



Spreading manipulated information in the United States was not the only target of the Confucius Institutes. They also aimed to intervene in freedom of speech and academic freedom. A noticeable example of this conduct was the recall of the invitation to the Dalai Lama at North Carolina State University in 2009.<sup>9</sup> As U.S.-China relations have worsened over the past four years, the Confucius Institutes have largely ceased their operations in the United States.

In 2009, Chinese President Hu Jintao initiated the “Grand External Propaganda Strategy.” This was done by exporting China’s state-own media outlets into foreign countries (e.g., *China Daily*, *Xinhua*, *China Radio International*, *People’s Daily*, *Global Times*, *Beijing Review*, and *CGTN*), purchasing foreign Mandarin-based new media outlets, bribing overseas Chinese organizations, and utilizing Western social media outlets (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) through hired guns (e.g., the 50 cent party). Nominally, these tools are used to revamp the “bad name” and reputation of China and to establish a more benign image. However, in practice, they are meant to manipulate the international information environment, dodging criticism and spreading disinformation through the power of numbers (hiring many Chinese netizens or even using Internet bots to post disinformation). Discourses in the public sphere are not the only target of the CCP; influencing information narratives through international organizations is also the battlespace for the CCP. According to a research report by RAND, “China’s use of social media disinformation campaigns has expanded in the wake of the military reorganization of the PLA that was launched in 2015, which included the establishment of the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) as a new, separate service stood up with a mission focus on the conduct of information warfare.”<sup>10</sup>

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9. 〈達賴喇嘛受邀加州大學 中國學生組織反彈〉, *Voice of America*, June 13, 2017, <<https://www.voachinese.com/a/chinese-student-group-objects-to-graduation-speech-by-dailai-lama/3898150.html>>.

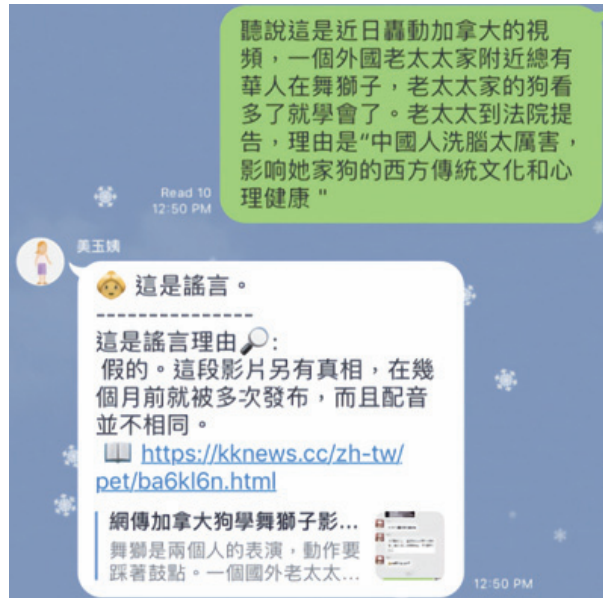
10. Scott W. Harold, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, & Jeffrey W. Hornung, *Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2021), p. ix, *RAND Corporation*, <[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4373z3.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z3.html)>.



**Figure 2. China's Misinformation on YouTube**

Source: 劉榮, 〈機器人假主播「刪Q」台學者踢爆中國網軍參戰〉, *Mirror Media*, October 16, 2021, <[https://www.mirrormedia.mg/story/20211016inv001/?utm\\_source=feed\\_related&utm\\_medium=yahoo](https://www.mirrormedia.mg/story/20211016inv001/?utm_source=feed_related&utm_medium=yahoo)>.

For example, it was recently discovered that China has been creating fake news on YouTube via Internet bots and spreading these news videos through Line and other social media outlets in Taiwan (see Figure 2). Those fake news have criticized the current government in Taiwan and engaged in disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccination. Another example is the spread of disinformation about foreign countries and societies. In Figure 3, Taiwanese citizens received a video clip and a false narrative aiming to undermine the credibility of Western culture (in this case, Canadian society). These examples all illustrate how cognitive warfare has penetrated into Taiwan's society.



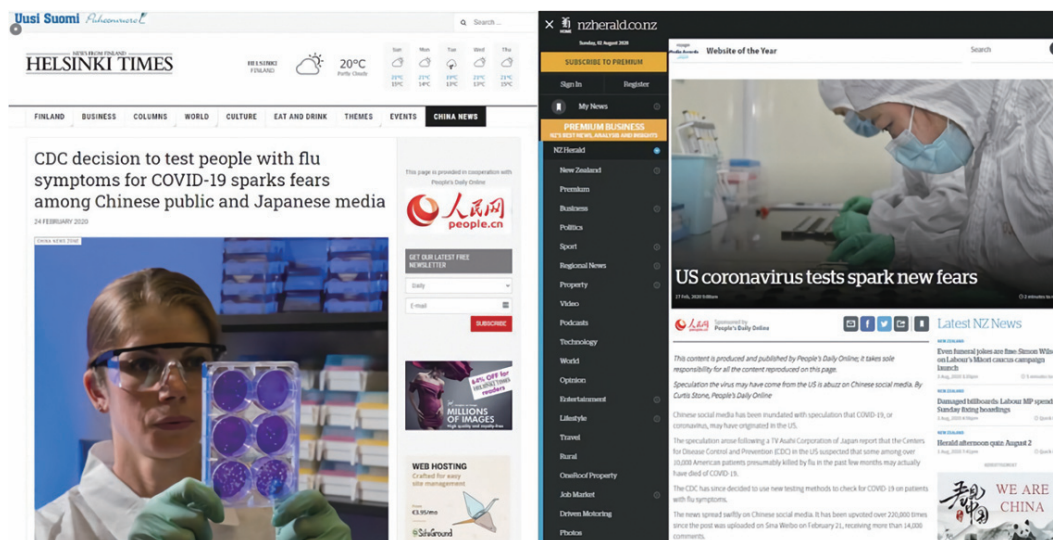
**Figure 3. Disinformation through Line**

Source: 〈終結假新聞的超神工具出現啦〉, *The Storm Media*, December 27, 2018, <<https://www.storm.mg/lifestyle/758942>>.

Of course, China's cognitive warfare does not stay in Taiwan only. Though Taiwan is considered to be a testing ground for China's cognitive warfare, it can expand to a global scale. One of the clear pieces of evidence is disinformation regarding COVID-19. According to Sarah Cook in *The Diplomat*, "one long-standing disinformation campaign emanating from both official Chinese government outlets and inauthentic accounts has been the promotion of a conspiracy theory that COVID-19 is a bioweapon developed in the United States and brought to China by the U.S. military in October 2019. PBS's Frontline documented 24 digital stories mentioning the unfounded theory that was posted by the Chinese Communist Party-aligned *Global Times*, with the earliest posted in March 2020 and the most recent in early February this year."<sup>11</sup>

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11. Sarah Cook, "Beijing Is Getting Better at Disinformation on Global Social Media," *The Diplomat*, March 30, 2021, <<https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/beijing-is-getting-better-at-disinformation-on-global-social-media/>>.



**Figure 4. Disinformation by the *People's Daily* claiming that COVID-19 may have originated in the United States, as adopted by foreign media outlets**

Source: Luiza Bandeira, Nika Aleksejeva, Tessa Knight, & Jean Le Roux, “Weaponized: How Rumors about COVID-19’s Origins Led to a Narrative Arms Race,” p. 32, February 2021, *Atlantic Council*, <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Weaponized-How-rumors-about-COVID-19s-origins-led-to-a-narrative-arms-race.pdf>>.

Luiza Bandeira, Nika Aleksejeva, Tessa Knight, and Jean Le Roux have studied how China has used tools of disinformation to spread this conspiracy theory in a report published by the Atlantic Council. As shown in Figure 4, they find that the disinformation used by China’s state-owned media outlet, the *People’s Daily*, was regurgitated by Finland’s *Helsinki Times* and New Zealand’s *New Zealand Herald*.<sup>12</sup> Though some argue that China’s cognitive warfare through disinformation has not effectively reached the United States and its allies,<sup>13</sup> the evidence says otherwise.

Disinformation is not the only focus of China’s cognitive warfare; cyber espionage is equally problematic. On July 19, 2021, the White House issued a statement titled “The United States, Joined by Allies and Partners, Attributes Malicious Cyber Activity

<sup>12</sup> Luiza Bandeira, Nika Aleksejeva, Tessa Knight, & Jean Le Roux, “Weaponized: How Rumors about COVID-19’s Origins Led to a Narrative Arms Race.”

<sup>13</sup> Scott W. Harold, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, & Jeffrey W. Hornung, *Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media*, p. 3.

and Irresponsible State Behavior to the People's Republic of China," criticizing China's irresponsible and malicious behavior in the cyberspace.<sup>14</sup> The most critical issue was that these cyberattacks on the United States and its allies originated from a place (China) where they have no jurisdiction. As a result, the only countermeasures are strengthening our cyber security and retaliating against the attackers and China in general. However, the latter would not resolve this issue. The Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency of the U.S. federal government tracks a series of Chinese activities against the United States in cyberspace, ranging from attacking the Microsoft Exchange Server to U.S. government agencies.<sup>15</sup> So far, as long as the United States wants to maintain a free cyberspace with minimum restrictions, China will always keep this advantage to itself and continue targeting the United States and its allies.

In sum, China's deployment of cognitive warfare has become a global concern. Disinformation through various official and social media platforms has also caused observable damages to the targeted societies. In addition, relentless cyber attacks from China further complicate the situation. Sadly, responding to these threats is always difficult as it involves coordination and cooperation between the government and all Internet users in the targeted states, which is difficult to achieve as people may not wish to pay attention to this domain. This problem is likely to continue while the countermeasures are developed to provide a stronger shield against China's cognitive warfare.

#### **IV. What Has Cognitive Warfare Achieved, If Anything At All?**

What has China achieved through cognitive warfare? Do citizens in other countries, such as the United States and Taiwan, think more favorably about China? With the

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14. The White House, "The United States, Joined by Allies and Partners, Attributes Malicious Cyber Activity and Irresponsible State Behavior to the People's Republic of China," July 19, 2021, *The White House*, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/07/19/the-united-states-joined-by-allies-and-partners-attributes-malicious-cyber-activity-and-irresponsible-state-behavior-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>>.

15. Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency, "China Cyber Threat Overview and Advisories," November 1, 2021, accessed, *Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency*, <<https://us-cert.cisa.gov/china>>.



ongoing U.S.-China tensions, the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, and China’s misconduct in censorship, suppression of freedoms and human rights, and the situations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, survey evidence suggests something opposite to what the CCP may have anticipated at an earlier stage.

	<span style="color: green;">■</span> Most unfavorable <span style="color: blue;">■</span> Least unfavorable																(year)	
	'02	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19	'20	'21
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
U.S.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	73	76
Canada	-	27	-	37	-	36	-	-	-	45	-	48	40	40	45	67	73	73
Sweden	-	-	-	40	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	59	49	52	70	85	80
Netherlands	-	34	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	43	42	45	58	73	72
Germany	-	37	33	54	68	63	61	59	67	64	64	60	60	53	54	56	71	71
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	71	67
France	-	42	41	51	72	60	59	49	60	58	53	49	61	52	54	62	70	66
UK	-	16	14	27	36	29	35	26	35	31	38	37	44	37	35	55	74	63
Italy	-	-	-	61	-	-	-	-	64	62	70	57	61	59	60	57	62	60
Spain	-	21	38	43	56	41	38	39	46	47	55	50	56	43	48	53	63	57
Greece	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	38	37	46	-	37	40	48	32	-	42
Japan	42	-	71	67	84	69	69	61	84	93	91	89	86	83	78	85	86	88
Australia	-	-	-	-	40	-	-	-	-	35	-	33	39	32	47	57	81	78
South Korea	31	-	-	42	49	54	56	-	-	50	42	37	-	61	60	63	75	77
Taiwan	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	69
New Zealand	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	67
Singapore	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	34

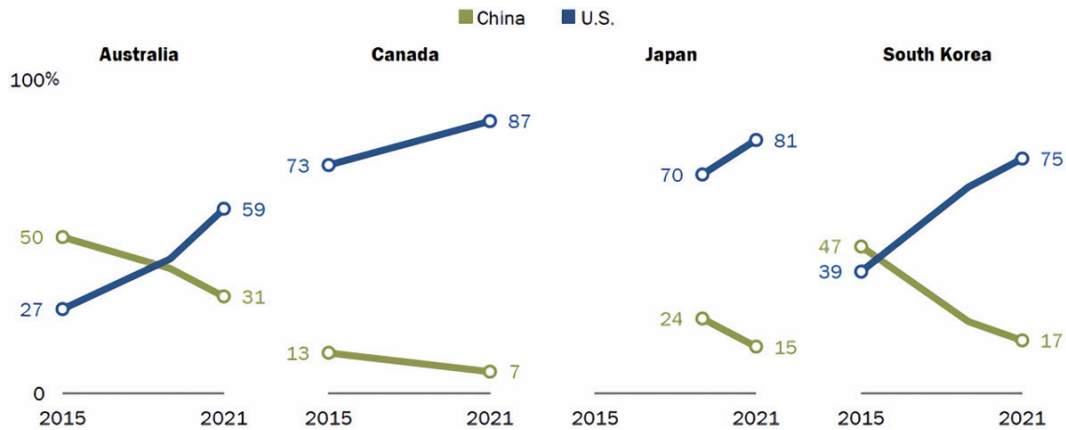
**Figure 5. Unfavorable Views on China from Different Countries**

Source: Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, & Christine Huang, “Large Majorities Say China Does Not Respect the Personal Freedoms of Its People,” June 30, 2021, *Pew Research Center*, <<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/06/30/large-majorities-say-china-does-not-respect-the-personal-freedoms-of-its-people/>>.

According to the Pew Research Center surveys, unfavorable views of China have steadily grown in various countries, including the United States, France, and Australia (see Figure 5). Aside from Greece and Singapore, the majority of countries hold an unfavorable view of China in all other polled countries in 2021. It is evident that China’s cognitive warfare did not generate the intended outcome.

Figure 6 further shows that under the U.S.-China tensions starting in 2018, the public among core U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific region, including Australia, Canada, Japan, and South Korea is more willing to choose strong economic ties with the United States than with China then it was when the question was asked in 2015. If the spread of disinformation and information narratives in favor of China had worked as expected,

citizens in these countries should be more willing to have stronger ties with China instead of the United States. Again, it seems that when China actively manipulates the information environment of the targeted countries, it is likely to backfire.



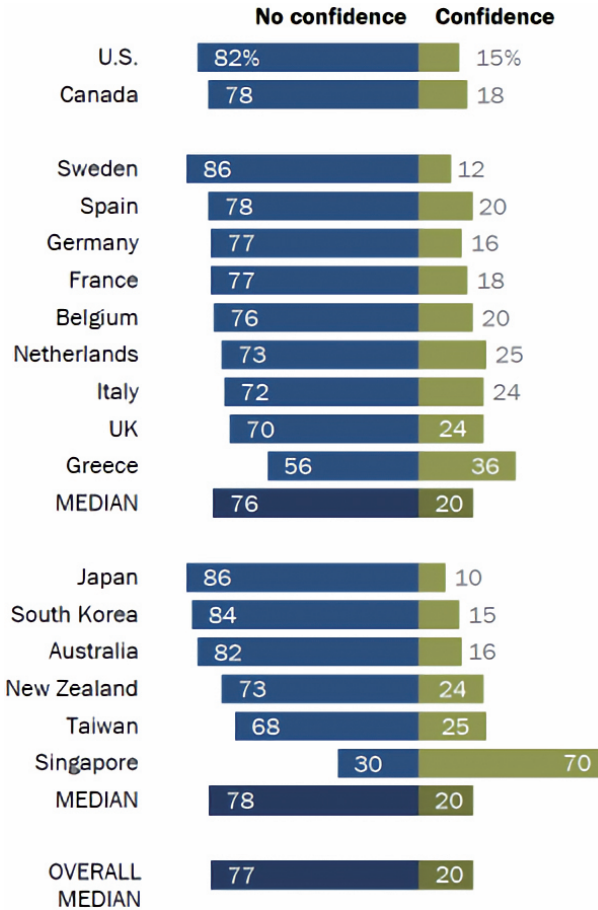
**Figure 6. More Countries Want to Build Stronger Economic Ties with U.S. over Ties with China**

Source: Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, & Christine Huang, “Large Majorities Say China Does Not Respect the Personal Freedoms of Its People.”

Note: % who say it is more important for their country to have strong economic ties with China/ U.S.

What is more surprising is the evidence presented in Figure 7. When asked whether they have confidence in Xi Jinping to do the right thing regarding world affairs, between 70 percent and 80 percent of respondents said they do not have confidence, with the exception of citizens of Singapore, the only non-democratic state in the poll. This is clearly not something the CCP and Xi would prefer to see. It is another sign of the backfire effect generated by China's cognitive warfare.





**Figure 7. Confidence in Chinese President Xi**

Source: Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, & Christine Huang, “Large Majorities Say China Does Not Respect the Personal Freedoms of Its People.”

Note: % who have no confidence/confidence in Chinese President Xi to do the right thing regarding world affairs.

As the strategic deployments of China’s cognitive warfare did not generate the anticipated outcome among democratic states, as evident in Figures 5-7, it is then more critical to evaluate whether cognitive warfare actually works in the primary target, Taiwan. From a macro view of Taiwan’s public opinion, it is difficult to say that such efforts have accomplished their intended job. And perhaps, similar to what we have witnessed regarding what has happened to citizens among other democracies, China simply miscalculated the likely outcomes of cognitive warfare.

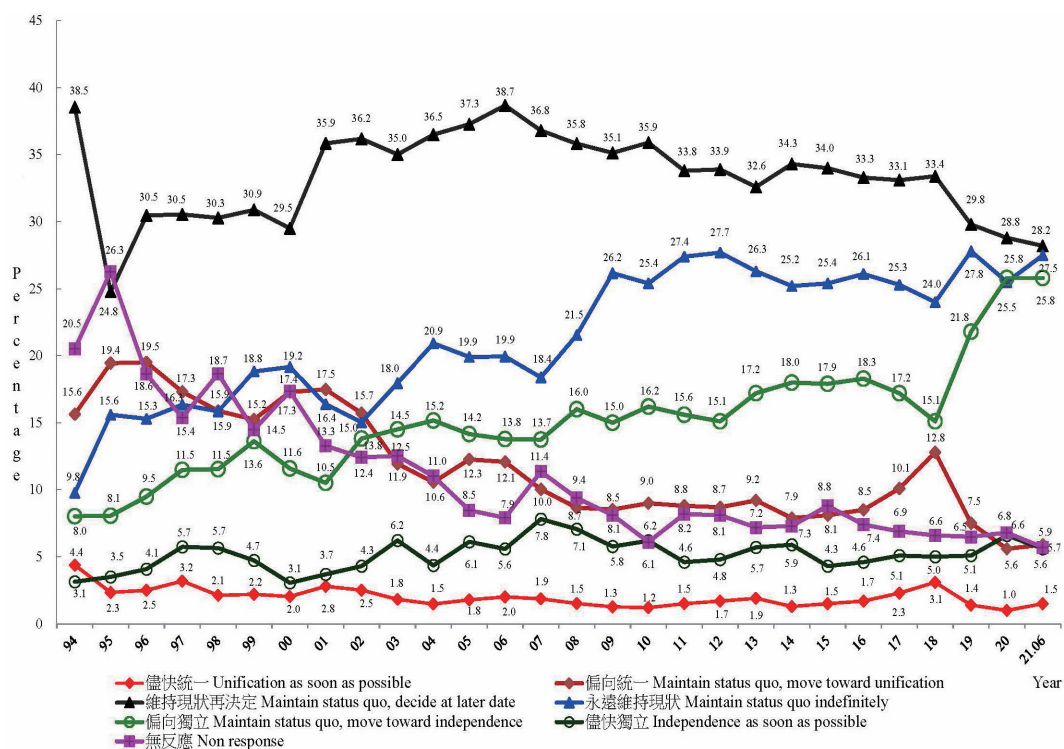


Figure 8. Changes in the Unification – Independence Stances of Taiwanese (1994-2021)

Source: Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, “Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with the Mainland (1994/12~2021/06),” July 20, 2021, *Election Study Center, NCCU*, <<https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7801&id=6963>>.

Figure 8 demonstrates the changes in the unification – independence stances of Taiwanese from 1994 to 2021. The majority of Taiwanese want to maintain the status quo, as the combination of “maintain status quo, decide at later date” and “maintain status quo indefinitely” is between 50 and 55 percent. However, there has been a steady increase in support for independence from 12 percent in 1994 to 31 percent in 2021 — the combination of “maintain status quo, move toward independence” and “independence as soon as possible.” Since the proportion of Taiwanese who want to maintain the status quo remains stable, an increase in support for independence means a decrease in support for unification with China. Therefore, the aforementioned disinformation and other tools of information warfare did not produce the intended outcome but rather made the Taiwanese keener to stay away from China.

In a nutshell, from the observations of public opinion in other democratic countries and Taiwan, China’s cognitive warfare did not necessarily work in the ways anticipated

by the CCP. Of course, this does not entail that China's cognitive warfare could not further divide the targeted societies, and Taiwan has experienced many of these attacks causing a wider gap in ideology and even biased criticisms against the government, such as the disinformation surrounding the referendum to ban the import of pork with the ractopamine additive which will be held at the end of 2021. In general, the survey evidence suggests that China's cognitive warfare tends to backfire, but that China may nevertheless keep using this strategy to further divide and creating chaos in the targeted society.

## **V. Conclusion**

This paper discusses the rationale behind China's employment of cognitive warfare against Western democracies. China's dream of replacing the United States as the world hegemon and its authoritarian nature, which differs from the values espoused by the existing hegemon, are the primary driving forces for this type of warfare. China's misbehavior in cyberspace has also made the publics in the targeted countries think less favorably of China, though the latter will nevertheless continue to use these tools to create chaos in these societies.

How can Taiwan and Western democracies, such as the United States, arm themselves against China's cognitive warfare? The leading solution is to generate public awareness of this issue and provide opportunities for citizens to judge disinformation. In addition, understanding the malicious intentions behind China and the CCP's conduct can also help citizens better prepare themselves to counter disinformation. In Taiwan, both the government and non-government organizations are collaborating to rebut disinformation on the Internet and in social media. It is in the interest of other countries to do as much.