

Air University Advanced Research: Shifting the Narrative on China

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Abstract

Over the course of the past century, the nature of warfare has changed dramatically. With the most recent era of conflict culminating in major campaigns in the Middle East, global strife continues to evolve and remains a challenge for states as they pursue ways to adapt to new problems across multiple domains. As a result of this evolution, one prominent arena of warfare has emerged as being effective for states to pursue interests: information.

Throughout the past decade, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has looked to dominate the realm of information not only by means of subtle infiltration, but also in many cases via overt actions. Through these operations the CCP seeks to gain authority on the world stage by shaping a view that portrays China as a model nation of governance and stable economic partnership; simultaneously, they attempt to delegitimize other countries such as the United States (U.S.) and its Western allies. Although the CCP has had success within the information arena in places like Africa, their operations are not without error proof. Between allegations of human rights abuses, deceitful economic contracts, and geographic encroachment, opportunities have arisen for western countries to reclaim the narrative on China.

The goal of the CCP's information operations program remains to build soft power within the international community concurrent with advancing their strategic objectives worldwide; as the they have made known in their national strategy, this is expected to be complete by 2049 (U.S. Department of Defense 2021). While the CCP continues to make headway with their global perception, U.S. policymakers can mitigate the effects by exploiting the results of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) predatory economic practices, shedding light on human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and strengthening western relationships in key geographic areas.

Background: China's Information Operations Apparatus

In today's increasingly interconnected world, the free flow of information is taken as a given. With the mass expansion of the internet and social media in the past decade across the globe, it has become second nature for individuals – particularly in western countries – to digest information through various internet-based applications. As the rise of digital media has provided for cheap, simple, mass dissemination of information, states have capitalized on this opportunity to further their own interests; China, in this case, is no exception.

Though the CCP has engaged in information operations for decades, advances in technology in recent years have provided the opportunity for significant expansion of those activities; not only has this given them the ability to distribute information faster and more efficiently, but it also has facilitated a new range of audiences across the world (Diresta et al. 2020). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a new wave of information operations campaigns from China, as they sought to shift blame on the origins of the virus to maintain global credibility (Diresta et al. 2020).

The effectiveness of the CCP's information campaigns can most notably be seen in parts of the world that are most economically tied to China. Africa, for instance, has seen a noticeable increase in positive views of the country in recent years, most likely due to the investments that the Chinese have focused on in the area over the past decade within the framework of their BRI (China Power Team 2020). Additionally, to the surprise of many, positive views of China in certain areas of the West have also increased; the United Kingdom, for example, saw a slight uptick in recent years of favorable views toward the country (China Power Team 2020).

In terms of global BRI investments, the CCP has demonstrated that they continue to seek opportunities that not only aid in the pursuit of their strategic goals, but also in the dominance of their preferred narrative. The vacuum created via the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is one area of concern as it presents an opening for China to invest both economically and diplomatically. Indeed, the CCP has

already begun to take advantage of the situation in the region in the same way they have in places like Africa (Tanzeem 2021). With Afghanistan providing a critical location for BRI operations, an incredibly rich source of rare earth minerals, and a population in need of stability, there is high likelihood that the CCP will look to capitalize in the region and attempt to shift perception (Tan 2021).

With situations like Afghanistan and other vulnerable countries posing strategic problems for the U.S. and its allies, it is imperative that the West regains dominance of global perception and counters the view that China is trying to shape.

Exploiting the Belt and Road

For the past decade, China's Belt and Road Initiative has been seen as ambitious yet effective (China Power Team 2017). Since the enterprise was announced in 2013, it has garnered contractual support from 139 total countries, resulting in China gaining economic, geographic, and diplomatic access to key locations around the globe (Sacks 2021). Though many regard the BRI as a project that is strategically competent and even cunning, the practices of the CCP regarding investments in partner countries fail to properly consider a vital factor in long-term sustainment: the sentiments of the populations of these areas.

Originally billed as a program that enhances partner countries' productivity, infrastructure, and economic integration, the BRI was seen positively by countries who lacked stability and financial prosperity (China Power Team 2017). With investments backed by an economically powerful state such as China, these countries saw prospects that could potentially provide answers to their domestic issues – many times with little input required of the loan recipient. As more BRI loans took hold in these areas, however, it became clear that the notion of “no strings attached” was not always the case; what has become apparent is that China often uses these BRI investments as a form of economic coercion, “bending the will” of recipient nations in attempts to satisfy their regional goals (Mobley 2019). In addition, initially thought of as an avenue for emerging markets to curb financial corruption, the BRI has

become a vehicle for corrupt practices itself, in some cases even resulting in debarring from several high profile banks (Hillman 2019).

As the deceitful nature of the BRI investments come to light, public sentiment in some of these recipient countries has begun to turn negative. In the case of the Melaka Gateway project in Malaysia, for example, the results of CCP investments were met with animosity toward the program; the population eventually saw the BRI projects as a cultural intrusion, and ultimately viewed the initiative negatively (Shepard 2020). Though indifferent and even somewhat welcoming to the investment at first, the local populace eventually grew hostile towards the venture and no longer supported it. Combined with behind-the-scenes corruption among the parties involved in development, the investment ultimately stagnated.

The Melaka Gateway project is an example of how U.S. policymakers can exploit the aspects of the BRI that are not often made known on the surface; if the support of the local populace of these targeted countries shifts unfavorable regarding BRI investments, leaders of these states will have to decide to side with their constituents or with the CCP. With proactive diplomatic and economic intervention directed at these states, the U.S. has the potential to halt the expansion of China's Belt and Road program. By taking advantage of the negative public sentiment that will come from local populations as BRI investments show their true colors, the U.S. can shift the narrative from the CCP as valued partners to deceitful opportunists.

Human Rights Abuses in the Xinjiang Region

As digital media continues to be a dominant source of news consumption globally, information spreads faster and farther than it ever has in the past; with minimal effort, viral news can reach virtually all parts of the world in a matter of minutes (Newman et al. 2021). Though this is often seen as a boon for countries seeking to advance a positive public image, it can also be a detriment as information is no longer completely in one's control. In a world where global perception, especially through digital media, is often paramount to conventional forms of power projection, states often go to great lengths to pride

themselves as being champions of human rights both domestically and internationally. Like the exploitation of the results of the BRI, the U.S. has an opportunity to highlight China's abuses of human rights and shift their global perception.

In the past five years, allegations have surfaced that China is not only forcing assimilation of ethnic Uighur Muslims in their northwestern region of Xinjiang, but also creating internment camps for this population in an attempt to eradicate their culture (Deng 2020). Although the CCP vehemently denies these claims and instead describes these areas as "re-education" programs designed to stamp out terrorism, evidence continues to mount that these facilities are designed specifically for internment and control of an ethnic minority in China (Hua 2021).

With the CCP's increased focus on the global image of China and the importance they place on soft power, shedding light on the human rights abuses in Xinjiang would be an effective strategy for the U.S. to pursue (Shambaugh 2015). Specifically, an information campaign targeted directly at exposing China's treatment of the Uighur minority will provide insight to the international community on the injustices committed by the state and will result in the denigration of the view of China as a model government; additionally, it would be advantageous for the U.S. to employ partnerships with multinational corporations (MNC) to aid in this campaign, as the global reach of these companies continues to grow. Moreover, these actions could lead the CCP to cease the operations in Xinjiang completely and end the violation of human rights. With a direct targeting of the CCP's influence of soft power, the U.S. can effectively reshape the global perception of China.

Revitalizing Western Relationships

As the world becomes more interconnected in the technological age, international partnerships are a key factor when shaping global perception. Though different states have varying interests and cultures, allied relationships are integral to regional security. Considering the progress the CCP has made with the BRI, it is important for the U.S. to seize on the strength of its relationships abroad to ensure the

Western narrative remains dominant. Specifically, the U.S. must revitalize the relationships in the western Pacific and focus on building soft power in the region.

In terms of partnerships, the U.S. has strong relations with two key countries in the Pacific – South Korea and Japan. As both countries look at growing Chinese power as a regional security threat, the U.S. has sought numerous economic deals over the past few years which have bolstered the relationships of the three nations (Congressional Research Service May, December 2021). One aspect of U.S.-Pacific relations is often overlooked, however, yet remains vital to the security interests of the region: the Philippines. Though U.S. partnership with the Philippines remains strong, China's economic and information campaigns in the region have not gone unnoticed in Southeast Asia, and they are resulting in an upward shift in support for the CCP in the region; additionally, the Filipino populace remains split regarding their attitudes toward China, particularly when it comes to their economy (Silver et al. 2020).

As China's expansionary activities in the region move further east, it is likely the Filipino people will see this as an encroachment on their sovereignty. Keeping the economic influence of the CCP in mind, it will be crucial for the U.S. to reassure the Filipino government that they support them in terms of national defense. Though protection of the sovereignty of the Philippines should be paramount, the U.S. should also consider economic revitalization for the country via bilateral agreements and investments. With a focus on defense and economic investment for the Philippines, the U.S. can begin to reshape their relationship with the Filipino population and shift the dominant view in the region to one of American reliability. As the U.S. expands on commitments in Southeast Asia, the potential second and third order effects could be positive, as well, possibly opening partnership doors with other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries in the region.

Conclusion

As the CCP looks to capitalize on the interconnected modern world and shape a worldview that portrays China as a model nation, western countries must look to new means to counter their development. By exploiting the results of the BRI, exposing human rights abuses, and reviving global partnerships, the U.S. can successfully reshape the narrative to one that highlights the West as the gold standard for governance.

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