Center for Strategic and International Studies Holds Discussion on Information Warfare and Competition With China

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Center For Strategic And International Studies Holds Discussion On Information Warfare And Competition With China

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SPEAKERS:

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CSIS CHINA STUDIES FREEMAN CHAIR JUDE BLANCHETTE

CSIS INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM SENIOR ADVISER SETH G. JONES

[*]JONES: Hi. I am thrilled to have representative Joaquin Castro here with me from the 20th Congressional District of Texas. My name is Seth Jones. I'm the Harold Brown Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Representative Castro, is the vice chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. He's on that house permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. He's also on the House committee on Education And Labor, and we'll talk about education issues and the Chinese a little bit later in our discussion. And also chairman of the Congressional Japan Caucus, so has a bit deep background in Asia, including on ASEAN.

So welcome again. Thanks for coming virtually to CSIS and let me just ask you first, there's been a lot of concern publicly first coming from U.S. intelligence officials like Evanina from the Director of National Intelligence Office and then we've heard social media organizations like Microsoft express concern about Chinese meddling in the U.S. election. What--what is your concern about what the Chinese are doing right now and to what degree or how serious of a threat do you see the Chinese right now in what will be a very important U.S. presidential as well as Senate and House elections?

CASTRO: Yeah, well first of all, thank you for having me. It's great to be back even if only virtually right now at CSIS and to discuss China and the topic of misinformation. I think that as a nation, we need to take any kind of election interference very seriously and, in many ways, we learned our lesson in 2016 when Russia severely interfered with our electoral process. And so the reports and the allegations that China is also trying to interfere with our election is obviously something that is very serious for our democracy.

Now, before I talk specifically about China, I want to lay out the context here because I mentioned 2016. There--you know, the intelligence agencies have told us that for years different countries have tried to monitor what our politicians are doing, what campaigns are doing, what's going on with U.S. elections and so forth. That's been true, for example, of Russia and China.

What Russia did differently in 2016 was a few things. First, they widely created a lot of fake accounts, fake personas and personalities to spread misinformation in the United States and even to mobilize American citizens to conduct different actions. So for example, in my home state of Texas, they got people to show up for pro-Confederate and anti-Confederate rallies in the city of Houston, Texas. So that was one element.

The other element also was that whereas previously nations had essentially spied on or attempted to spy on campaigns and so forth, what was partly different this time was that Russia took that information and in concert working with others essentially dumped that information and weaponized it for political purposes. So when you ask the question how concerned should we be about what China is doing, we ought to be very concerned. The question is what methods are they using and what--what are they going to do with that information?

Again, all of it is bad, but I think when you see what Russia did in weaponizing that information, that's especially damaging and especially a high degree of interference with a nation. And right now, as far as--at least as far as we've seen, Russia and China have been operating on two different levels where the Russian interference is much more focused, much more directed end in terms of political impact, much worse. Again, not to dismiss what China is doing because we have to be vigilant about it, but we need the intelligence agencies to continue to figure out what China's purpose is there.

JONES: Yeah, China has long collected on companies. I was--my information as well as millions of Americans was taken in among the SF-86 forms in the OPM data breach--

CASTRO: --Right--

JONES: --And Equifax. One thing that is interesting on the weaponization is the New York Times, among other locations have reported that the Chinese did pursue direct disinformation in the early stages of COVID by forwarding texts to millions of Americans in the United States about the potential for a U.S. government lockdown, quarantine with U.S. federal forces on the streets.

In my conversations to U.S. intelligence officials, several of them said to me that was relatively new. It wasn't just stealing information, it was trying to create some fear in the United States and exploiting--exploiting our vulnerabilities on access to social media in ways that were more like the way the Russians had operated. So I don't know if you've seen some evidence that the--the Chinese are getting a little bolder and how they're operating.

CASTRO: Well, I think that's absolutely true of different foreign actors and even non-state actors. I think, as you mentioned, and as I had said before, traditionally, what state actors were doing was collecting information about Americans whether through data theft or espionage and so forth and then taking it to evaluate that intelligence to figure out what their posture might be towards a particular candidate, towards the nation, you know, trade issue, whatever it might be.

What you saw in 2016 was that Russia essentially changed their model. They suddenly not only collected the information, but they were dumping it for political damage. And so it's not surprising then that with the advent of social media, which allows another--a lot more entry points, actually, for a nation to be able to get the attention of a group of people, in this case the American public, it's not surprising with these new platforms that nations would start to--start to exploit those.

You know, one of those platforms, aside from social media, as you mentioned, is texting, is the ability to widely get out a message through text messages to a bunch of Americans. And so we do have to be very vigilant because I think that nations took the message from 2016 that you can do real damage and inflict real pain in the United States

through your methods of not just collection, but of how you weaponize that information. And so it doesn't surprise me and we have seen--we have seen nations start to figure out how they can innovate and do more damage.

JONES: Yeah. Let me--let me take up us back a little bit to more of a sort of strategic level. And there have certainly been concern, you've actually written about this both in Washington and Beijing that the two countries are engaging in long-term strategic competition. I think you wrote in a piece two years ago to--there needs to be some competition, not--not cheating--Compete Not Cheat, I think, was the title of that--of that piece.

CASTRO: Right.

JONES: There's been along those lines a lot of focus on military competition, including building of major conventional in the nuclear platforms and systems, certainly on the economic side, which you highlighted in that piece. A lot of people don't often emphasize the information and ideological space.

So my question here is how important do you think information is in U.S. competition with a--with the Chinese? And actually, from the other perspective as well, how important is information from a Chinese perspective in competing with the United States?

CASTRO: Well, I think that information, no question with the digital age that we're in, the fact that people can draw their information and their news from so many sources is incredibly important. And we have seen the danger, including in our past election of completely unmediated information where the sources can't necessarily be trusted and the impact that that can have.

But let's establish two separate baselines here. In the United States, you have what is, relatively speaking, a very open society with information flowing from all sides. And somewhat mediated, but not merely as mediated or restricted or regulated as you have in China. So I would argue that in that competition of ideas in that competition of thought that our best weapon is the truth, that our best weapon is the fact that we are open to different ideas, that we don't shy away from opinion and perspective of different kinds.

The same can't be said for what you see in China. I remember being there in 2010 for the World Expo, for example, and not being able to get on Facebook even, right? And so there's still a lot of media sources that are not available to the Chinese people, a lot of information that is kept from them. And to me, that signifies a kind of weakness for China that in many ways their skill scared of the truth. They are scared of information.

That said, they're obviously a very powerful economy, the second largest economy in the world, our largest trading partner. They have ambitious plans for their future and their Belt and Road Initiative is very ambitious and that's why I said in my piece, part of what we've suffered from in the United States is that we don't have, to date, a comprehensive or holistic approach to China and we have not distinguished to me what is an important difference. What it means for China to compete fairly versus what it means for them to cheat. And until we can get at that distinction and understand it and agree more or less among ourselves even as Americans which is which, you know which is one in which is the other, then what you're going to see is this halting kind of one off, you know, policies towards China, which I think is what we've seen a lot of in recent years.

JONES: Yeah. I mean, we certainly have. And on your point more broadly about vulnerabilities in the Chinese system, you know, there are certainly vulnerabilities and there have been historically when regimes attempt to control access of information to their populations. They often--those populations often want more truthful information.

So we'll get actually a little bit later we'll get into your thoughts on ways to support individuals, including in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan that are on the receiving end of Chinese information and disinformation operations. But before we go there, I wondered if we could get your thoughts on COVID-19. You know, one of the interesting components--this is a disinformation and partly misinformation component, which is Beijing almost immediately denied that COVID-19 originated in Wuhan and then actually, they went even third further including government

officials from senior officials from the ministry of foreign affairs, openly accusing the U.S. including U.S. Army of introducing the virus into China last year.

How--how do you deal with those kinds of accusations? How serious do you take them? And these were senior Chinese officials arguing that the virus did not originate in China but actually originated from--from the U.S. introduction. Do you think these kinds of examples mark a new type of Chinese aggressiveness in the information sphere? I mean how do you--how do you gauge that?

CASTRO: I mean, that's a great question. And you know, part of me says in my own mind that that's tough to answer because the world had not seen a pandemic of this nature for 100 years, right, since the so called Spanish flu. And I think that the Chinese government and the U.S. government were grappling to deal with it.

That said, I think it's fair to be very critical about how--about the information or misinformation that China put out. And again, we should lead with the truth and we should demand the truth of China and his leaders. But what we can't do, and I think what President Trump had a tendency to fall into was exaggeration or unfounded claims because then what we do is we lose credibility not only I think among the people of the world and among some of our own citizens, but certainly with China and, you know, with our allies.

And I think the same for them. You know, when they go out and they deny the obvious, when they go to--when they go out and they deny things that people can see with their own eyes, I think it's the same thing. I think they lose credibility with the world. And so we should absolutely demand the truth of them.

JONES: Yeah. I think that's certainly true. And demand the truth of ourselves too in--in what we say. So I wanted to turn to an issue that is I think near and dear to your--your family and your background, which is education. Your father is a retired teacher. The education system in the U.S. has--is very important. It makes us competitive.

It has also been a source of some debate within the United States. There has been a small proportion, I want to emphasize small proportion of students, including visitors from outside of the country, including from China. There are examples of espionage at U.S. universities, there's been a lot of debate about the freedom of speech and the freedom to debate issues as part of the Confucius Institutes at U.S. universities.

We now have a professor at Harvard University who's been arrested and is being charged with violating U.S. law as part of a 1000 Talents program from China. So from your perspective, how do you navigate between keeping the United States a top elite country for education, including in its graduate and its undergraduate levels, but also in ensure that we're protecting our own national Security? How do you--how do you balance that?

CASTRO: That's an important consideration, right? Look, this country has benefited from the fact that throughout the generations the world's best and brightest have wanted to come to the United States not only to study but to do things like start a business here. And because of that, the United--in part because of that at least, the United States became the strongest, most powerful economy in the world.

So when you start considering blocking people out or shutting people off, you have to think about that history and that context. Now, there's no question that as you mentioned, there have been high profile cases of people stealing information from American universities, American research universities, and we have to be able to vet people better and put a stop to things like that.

But what I do disagree with is just wholesale saying we're not going to take any more Chinese students, we're going to X out the whole country and, you know, you just kind of put a blanket prohibition on a whole group of people. That has existed before, by the way. That was called the Chinese Exclusion Act, which existed for decades in the United States. So I don't think that that's the answer either.

Again, redouble our efforts to vet people, redouble our efforts to be vigilant, to make sure that no one either from China or any other foreign country is stealing data or intelligence or secrets, so to speak. I think that's fair. But to say in a blanket way we're just not going to take y'all anymore, I don't think is the best policy. And again, you know,

like I said, when they cheat, we have to be there to call them on it. And in those instances, obviously, that fits into the case of cheating.

JONES: Yeah, there's another issue that's cropped up this summer, including during COVID when some American universities have--have gone virtual and have had students participating in classes from overseas, including Hong Kong and China more broadly and there have been a number of reports, newspaper articles from U.S. pay newspapers, Princeton for example, students in a Chinese politics class are using now codes instead of names to protect their identity so that they can speak freely in class, in some cases over mediums like Zoom that can be monitored by Chinese agencies. Do you--do you see potential challenges here with--with free speech and the U.S. classrooms now being impacted at all or is this a--is this kind of overstated threat? What's your sense about this?

CASTRO: Well, let me start with what we wish for. We wish for, again, a society where opinions and perspectives an analysis are freely offered and people don't have to be fearful of what they're going to say, particularly in an academic setting. You know, obviously as long as they're not hurting anybody, they're not engaging in hate speech and so forth, with certain guidelines, but that's what we wish for.

So then the question is how do you achieve that? And I do think that it's fair two in a diplomatic way because I've said that we have to lead with diplomacy, in a diplomatic way to pressure China to make sure that--that they allow people to express themselves as freely as possible. And I do think that the United States and its allies around the world, including many of the countries that China is getting close to--closer to in Europe, in Latin America and Africa, we need to work together to let China know that this is an important issue to us, that this kind of freedom of expression, freedom of speech and opinion is an important issue to us and we should--we should pressure them in that way.

JONES: Yeah, it certainly is important. I wonder if I can go back in history a little bit and--and raise this issue of--of the Cold War. The U.S. with the Soviets engaged in several decades long Cold War. I think as you noted with the Chinese, this is not just combat competition, it's about cooperation. The U.S. did engage in some cooperation with the Soviets including on arms control issues.

But there was an important element, I think, particularly as we got deeper into the Cold War, including in the latter part of the Cold War where information became an important aspect of that competition. So leaving aside for a moment the differences, of which there are many between The Soviet Union and China, there it may be lessons, and this is where I wanted to ask you about lessons in what we can learn from that rivalry. For example, the U.S. did make a number of significant investments in the information arena. The U.S. expanded its involvement in radio programs, including Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, which beamed into the Soviet Union and into Eastern Europe.

This goes back to your comment at the beginning of our conversation about populations that face state run media and repressive--repressive media outlets. The U.S. also had established a U.S. information agency. So is there anything we can take from those components of the Cold War that might be worth thinking about as we move in--as we move forward in competition with the Chinese, especially the role of information?

CASTRO: I think there absolutely is. I think that we need to strengthen our ability to project our message out into the world. Again, this is a nation that over the generations has been a North star on things like freedom, human rights, democracy, rooting out corruption. And as long as we make our message consistent with those principles and those values, then I think more and more people around the world will buy into them, will agree with them, and that's what we seek.

We--I believe that people--there are people in China that are yearning for more freedom and also, they want human rights to be respected, they want to be able to fully make their own political choices, they want to root out corruption. And by the way, that's the case not only in China, but I think throughout the world that people yearn for these things. And we're also in an age where people yearn for information. That's always been true.

However, the difference now is that there's so many more platforms by which information can get to people. So when governments, including the Chinese government shut off as many avenues as they can in order to control the information, overtime, I don't see that as a sustainable method of governance.

And the United States, as I mentioned, I think our job number one is to get our message out about the principles and values that we stand for. We do need to strengthen our apparatus for that because it has atrophied over the years and that makes it harder for the United States to reach the people of the world. We need to do a better job of it.

JONES: So as you look across the U.S. government today, we certainly have substantial funding for the Department of Defense and--and what goes along with that are all of the--all the money that goes into platforms and systems from aircraft carriers to submarines that might engage at some point in conflict, but you also have a background in at least two of the committees you sit on that gets into other areas of U.S. National Security. And I'm wondering if you have thoughts here on, you know, the--how how well funded and how well prepared we are in our other government agencies.

State, for example, has had its--it's got its budgets are relatively low certainly compared to the Department of Defense. We don't even have a U.S. information agency anymore--Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty budgets and Voice America are pretty small right now in our radio budgets for Asia. What's your sense about how well prepared we are to get our messages out on multiple forums really outside of the military dimension?

CASTRO: I mean, that's a great question. Look, we have the strongest military in the world. We spend by far more money than any nation in the world on our military. But I'll tell you this, I don't believe we can buy enough tanks, jet fighters or any other kind of military equipment that is going to convince the people of the world that the United States is--that it should be the North star for this world.

And the only way we're going to do that is by--by living our principles and values, number one, in this country and then also by telling the people of the world what we are about. And so to your question, yes, I think we need to strengthen the infrastructure of diplomacy. Over the last few years, what we've seen is that that infrastructure of diplomacy has been weakened. I won't say it's completely hollowed out because I think that's unfair, but it has been weakened.

And I say that realizing that vis-a-vis our military, we were already leaning on our defense infrastructure more than our diplomatic infrastructure before. And over the last few years, we've weakened our diplomatic infrastructure. So then the next few years, what I see is an imperative for us to strengthen that infrastructure of diplomacy. And of course that--again, that includes our messaging and our information that we put out about what this country stands for, what it's about, you know, the fact that we believe that human rights people around the world should be respected and that people's rights deserve to be respected. All of those things. I think we've got to do a better job about.

And also, when you look at the military and its spending, we are, besides--I know we're discussing information and misinformation, but when you think about intelligence, China, Russia, and a few other nations are quickly working to develop in the areas of artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and a few other areas. And if they are successful in--in those missions and if they're successful well before the United States, the risk that we--that we run is that some of even our most sophisticated weaponry, the things that we pay billions of dollars for could be rendered useless in a manner of a few keystrokes, literally a few keystrokes if they're able to perfect the technology that they're pursuing.

And so to me, not only--you know, I said we've got strengthen that infrastructure of diplomacy, and it's true, but even if you just looked at the defense part, there are things that we have to adjust in terms of how we're spending in defense and in preparation, in cyber security. I don't think that we do nearly enough in cyber.

You know, our alliances are not as strong as they could be, although I will give credit that we have tried to strengthen them in the last--in a few years since 2016, but still, they are not where they could be and we've got to

put a lot of work into cyber security and cyber alliances as well. If not, I'm telling you with the technology that could be coming, a lot of these weapons that we've paid high dollar for could be rendered useless.

JONES: And one of the things you brought up is Artificial Intelligence, machine learning in the--in your answer to the question, and that does raise one of the final questions I have is the--the U.S. intelligence community under the director of national intelligence in 2019 shut down all access to the open source enterprise so that--that Americans or researchers can't get access to translated Chinese information. One of the reasons that we've expressed some concern about that, and I have as well is because during the Cold War, for example, one of the best ways to understand what was going on within the Soviet Union was our foreign broadcast information service that translated really millions of--of words of Russian, including from Russia's allies in Eastern Europe and made them publicly available.

So part of the question is what role really should open source play, it's certainly not just a government entity because we do have with machine learning and artificial intelligence ways to translate documents, but what has struck me in watching some of the issues like COVID-19 within China is how much there's a robust debate going on on Chinese platforms that most Americans will never see because it is in Chinese and most people do not, A, speak Mandarin and B, that information is not translated. So the largest newspaper--circulating newspaper in China is that translation into Mandarin of English and other foreign news sources. And part of the question is how serious should we be taking open source information as we move into the future?

CASTRO: Well, I think you're right to be concerned and I think that it's essential. And generally speaking, I think that the more eyes you have on these things, the better, that you shouldn't just contain it to a smaller group of people. And the reason is that you have a lot of people in the United States in many fields, in academia and research and others that I believe whose perspective can be helpful as we examine these things.

And look, we don't want a Cold War with China. We don't want a repeat of the decades long relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States. But we do want to understand China and we want to understand what they were saying and doing. And that effort goes beyond just a limited group of people in the intelligence community, for example. I think they should lean on their fellow Americans, you know, in--like I said, in other capacities--we're working in other capacities who can also be helping--help us understand these dynamics. And so I am hoping for more openness in the coming years.

JONES: Last question and probably the most difficult and certainly the most sensitive is how do we in the U.S. think about combatting disinformation or supporting freedom in democracy overseas, particularly in places like Taiwan and Hong Kong, both of which are on the front lines of China's information warfare efforts? So from your perspective, are there things we wanted to avoid doing and are things that we wanted to do a little--take a little more seriously, steps we should--we should be thinking about that we have haven't taken?

CASTRO: I mean, you're right. That is a tough question because when you take the--we'll take the example of Hong Kong. Look, we want--

JONES: --Which you've been active in tweeting about it recently, I've seen.

CASTRO: Yeah, yeah. We proposed legislation on it with Rep. Curtis and the Foreign Affairs Committee and Marco Rubio had it on the Senate side. We want to be supportive of the folks in Hong Kong as they try to preserve their rights, preserve a Democratic Hong Kong and also, you know, spoke up--we spoke out against the national security law that China put into place. I think that was very important.

So you asked the question, you know, what is our best approach. And the reason I say it stuff is because, look, what's the effort that's going on in Hong Kong, among Hong Kongers (SP) has to be seen as a--as a--as a native effort. It can't be seen as an effort that is primarily driven by the United States or anyone else, just as things that are going on in the United States need to be seen as things that are going to be driven by Americans, right?

And so--and so we want to be supportive, but it's their initiative and it's their effort. Now, I think what we can do is that we can speak out to China and also speak out to the world about what we believe and our perspective on these issues. And of course, within the United States, we can try to take legislative action, as I propose and other Democrats and other Republicans have proposed. But it's important to remember first and foremost that the people in Hong Kong are doing these things because that's what they believe because that's the future they want, right, because their disagreements with China are their own.

And you know--and that--that I think is that the tough part is how do we make sure that the world and that even China knows and realizes that those efforts are native efforts there and that we--that we support them as Americans. And I'll tell you, mean, it was--it was incredible to see--to see during these months of protest the American flags, for example, the statements that have come out of Hong Kong and the inspiration that Hong Kong has drawn from the United States and from other democracies and, you know, it's going to be important that you know, we continue to speak up and stand up for them.

JONES: Well, thank you very much. I think this last issue highlights how important the information component is and how important it is for you and others on the Hill to be taking it seriously, which you have been. So I just want to thank you very much, Congressman, for taking a few minutes with us here, discussing issues related to China, information, disinformation and thank you very much for all your doing in supporting the American people.

CASTRO: Well, thank you all. Thank you very much for having me.

JONES: Thanks.

(RECESS)

BLANCHETTE: Well, hello and welcome my name is Jude Blanchette. I'm the Freeman Chair and China Studies here at CSIS.

I'm really excited about today's conversation where we will be talking about U.S. competition with China but instead of focusing on some of the more traditional domains of the growing rivalry, we're going to focus today on information/disinformation and the role that these are playing increasingly in the bilateral rivalry.

I can really think of no one better to help us unpack this issue than our guest Congressman Will Hurd, who since 2015 has been serving as the U.S. representative for Texas' 23rd Congressional District.

Representative Hurd really brings a unique lens and background to this challenge having served as a operations officer in the CIA for the better part of a decade with tours in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India but also brings a keen interest and background training in all issues technology related, especially computer science which was an early focus of his.

In Congress, among other things he serves on--as a ranking member for the subcommittee on intelligence modernization and readiness, which falls under the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and I think very apposite for our discussion today, he's been a keen and outspoken voice on the challenge that China presents to the United States.

Just in preparing for this, looking through some of his recent writings, you see a focus on not looking at the competition in the rearview mirror but really trying to think through the next iterations of this challenge and what the United States has to be doing in terms of short and long term investments to better position us to be competing and ultimately winning in this challenge and this competition with China.

I saw just recently the Congressman called China the greatest political threat the U.S. faces and looking at his work with Representative Robin Kelly in attempting to develop a national strategy on artificial intelligence I think both demonstrates a very deep commitment to finding bipartisan solutions to these challenges but I think a really laser like focus on what the United States needs to be doing to think through the full 21st century of competition.

And so, it's a great honor and pleasure to be joined by Representative Hurd to unpack this crucial topic of information competition between the U.S. and China.

Congressman Hurd, thank you very much for joining us today.

HURD: It's a pleasure to be on, it's an important topic and it's crazy when I was--you know if I go back to 2008, late 2008 when I made the decision to run for Congress I was in the Hindu Kush Mountains in Afghanistan and I never would have thought I'd be sitting talking about technology and disinformation in China when my career was kind of terrorism and chasing nuclear weapons proliferators.

I did you know China was a target for everyone and trying to better understand but I would think even my time in the CIA we viewed China as kind of a regional power rather than a global super power and so my understanding of what I called this new Cold War has evolved from my time in the agency and they're obviously a global power.

So, it's great to be with you to chat about these topics.

BLANCHETTE: Well, you've already hit upon a theme that will I think run throughout our discussion today, which is the last time the United States was engaged in a truly great power competition was with the Soviet Union and so it's (INAUDIBLE) that you mention this as a new cold war.

And of course, it's the new, where all the interesting challenging stuff is, rather than this just being a repeat of the old cold war.

We're vexed with some issues of economic, technological human capital integration which makes this such a thorny issue.

HURD: It's even--well it's even more complicated because the U.S. and Russian cultures, economies were never anywhere as intertwined as the U.S. and China is.

I think that China probably more of a frenemy, right? It's a potential customer, right to a lot of great U.S. businesses but it's absolutely an adversary as well and so that's a unique challenge that we didn't have in dealing with the U.S.S.R. or Russia.

BLANCHETTE: Yeah, it's a crucial point.

To sort of stand at that 35,000 foot elevation here, as hopefully we descend down, the first thing I want to ask you about is as a framework a lot of the focus now, not exclusively, but a lot of the focus especially in think tanks but even in the U.S. government is focusing on some of the more traditional domains of great power competitions.

So, obviously over at the Pentagon they're doing a lot work on military competition. You see an increasing focus on economic competition you yourself have talked a lot about. How do we make North America more competitive economically with China out in global markets?

We see a lot of focus on diplomatic competition with China. There seems to be a relative de-emphasis or lack of emphasis on information and ideological space.

And so just as a framing question I wanted to ask your topline thoughts on in those silos or buckets of these various elements of the competition, what role do you see information and as an adjunct, ideology playing today and looking forward into the future between the two countries.

HURD: Well, it's going to continue to be increasing area that we have to deal with because it moves faster than all those other--all those elements and in any other domain and so we have to be prepared for that and I don't think we are.

I think COVID is a good example of how early on we know the Chinese government tried to claim that this was the United States, that it started at a military base in Italy. They also going to our western allies and say you can't trust the U.S. to help you with this, we're the ones.

They even at some points the Chinese had gotten support from European countries on the ventilators and PPE and then they tried to sell that back to those countries and so this--this is the kind of game that we have to be ready for and it starts with what is their goal, their desire to be a world leader, the world leader, not a world leader, the world leader in advanced technology and about 11 areas by 2049.

Now, this is not--this is not my hypothesis, this is not something I collected when I was in CIA. This is them saying this about themselves and it starts with that.

And so why are they trying to do that? And ultimately a data plays a role in all these issues, right?

High powered compute plays a role in all this. Advanced engineering, like algorithms plays a role in all this. And what is at the core of all this? Information.

And so how do you collect it, how do you weaponize it?

Let's go back to the (INAUDIBLE) of 2015.

22.1 million Americans who have gone through a security clearance. Now what the SF86, stands for--literally stands for standard form 86 has information on family members that may be living overseas.

So, the Chinese now have access to any Chinese American that may have a family member now living in China. How are they going to use and leverage that kind of information?

So, not only is it collecting information to move their operations, it's weaponizing it in a way in order to move the narrative and information operations helps in all these other domains of general (INAUDIBLE) of power competition. And so, you can prepare the actual physical battle space with information operations.

This is what all of our military planners talk about. Why do we care about the fact that space is now a contested domain, just like air, land and sea?

Because space decides and influences the way information flows terrestrially. And so, all of these issues are connected.

Why should we care about TikTok?

I don't care about some fancy--you know some dance moves somebody has but it's a lot of data that is tagged on the shapes and styles of faces that the Chinese government can't get in the mainland. So, it's all these things--things are connected.

BLANCHETTE: I wanted to linger on something you mentioned at the top of your remarks which was on China's sort of narrative war coming out of COVID-19, still to this day outright denying or at least obscuring or attempting to obscure where the origins of this were, speaking in the passive voice, leading in this kind of general, "well, we don't know where this originated, hopefully someday we'll find out".

And you've written a lot about this, but in thinking about the playbook that China has used on overt disinformation, whether that's claiming through government officials over Twitter that maybe this came in through the U.S. Army.

I wanted to get your thoughts on what does this tell us or what does this tell you about Chinas shifting playbook on disinformation as a--as just a contextual remark, it was the case that up until very recently, experts or analysts were saying look there's a different playbook between Russia and China.

Russia is much more, it's like the Pistons in the late '80's, it throws elbows, you know it plays dirty. China--China sort of plays much more formal, much more elegant.

It seems to me that that's shifting a bit with seeing the more, the sort of Bill Laimbeer approach that China has been using with COVID-19.

I wanted to get your thoughts on, are we seeing an evolution in China's aggressiveness in the disinformation space and what does that mean to you?

HURD: So, I--so the short answer is yes but it's not new tactics for them.

It is new tactics used on the world stage. They use all of these tactics internally, right? They use this in order to force obedience in the homeland. We're seeing how they're evolving and using these tactics right now in Hong Kong and so we should not be surprised that an authoritarian government is using these kinds of tactics on the world stage.

We can go back even--I think it was 2017 when the first Chinese military base outside of Asia--outside of East Asia, in Djibouti, I think that was a wakeup call for a lot of people because again, I think the prevailing sentiment was that Russ--I mean China was a major player in East Asia and they only care about East Asia.

No, that was old world thinking. We all laughed at "made in China", right? You know that's going to be some knock off. That's not the case anymore, especially when it comes you know the fear about microchips and things of that nature.

And so--so, we're going to see they have a playbook that has been developed over a couple of decades and we're that being used in a broader way and I do believe that COVID was an opportunity to supercharge their efforts and that's why I think some of these information operations are becoming more aggressive.

Oh, and by the way, is it being countered properly and negative--I learned a few things when I was in the CIA. Be nice with nice guys, tough with tough guys and if there's no consequences to negative behavior, that negative behavior will continue and escalate and the only way that we're going to deal with this, we can't do this by ourselves.

We have to be working with our allies. Let's start with the EU, let's start with NATO and making sure that we're pushing back. We've got to make sure that we're in lockstep with Australia and Japan and South Korea and Vietnam on some of these issues because we have to have a collective response to these--to this behavior.

BLANCHETTE: Yeah, certainly your last comment there reminds that it seems that the United States has forgotten the fact that I think we hold all the big major cards here. It's just we're not deploying them.

China has an unenviable number of allies, North Korea. Whereas the United States is able to bring to the table and leverage a pretty robust and thick network of allies and partners which creates a sort of size factor and scale factor which certainly rivals China but we're in a moment where we've lost our mojo and certainly I think it's clear in looking at a lot of our responses or how we're sizing up the China challenge that we've forgotten all the substantial elements of national strength that we have which our allies are just one.

HURD: I would say on that too, we often times forget about soft power, when you talk about these issues, we always talk about the dime frame of mind, diplomatic intelligence, military and economic. We often times forget the economic piece and with what the Chinese are doing with the One Belt One Road initiative, our response to that, a--a new redesign of OPEC, you know, is that doing enough? I was in El Salvador literally meeting with the president the day after they made the announcement of working with the Chinese on support project, which we know was a--was a debt trap. And so are we doing that?

And I would say we've made some mistakes in Eastern Europe when it comes to, you know, I spent a lot of time in Eastern Europe in Congress and a lot of them are like why can't we get more old episodes of Oprah or Seinfeld or some of these kinds of things to see that American culture that we all love? And they were having a hard time.

And what the Russians were doing, they were providing the--the programming and including Russian news. The Chinese are going to start doing something similar. And so if we don't start focusing on some of our--that soft power, then--then we're going to--we're going to have a hard time.

BLANCHETTE: I've always said that Seinfeld reruns are our most potent offensive soft power weapon. So I just want to follow up just one last question on the election piece here. We're moving towards our presidential election in November. We've had some pronounced warnings from senior law enforcement, intelligence officials about specifically--about the concern of a threat from China.

I want to get your assessment of how big of a concern this is and, crucially, with steps do you think we can be taking now to protect against November, but I also think also forward looking. What should we be doing about modern modernizing our election system to be able to withstand some of these threats?

HURD: So I actually held the first hearings on election interference back in 2016 before the 2016 elections was over and one of the things that we have seen when it comes to hardening the vote counting machines and the tabulations machines, states have done a pretty good job since 2016 making sure that you have the ability to have an audit trail so that when--when the recount happens--and as somebody who has won an election by 900 votes, every vote definitely matters. And so we've seen that happen.

The question becomes if you're trying to influence something--somebody, how does that impact your--ultimately your vote? And one of the things that I would like to see, the--the social media companies have gotten pretty good at trying to take down folks that are misusing and abusing those systems for a nation state, you know, that is doing information operation, right? We can monitor and we--they've understood the tactics, techniques, and procedures that these troll farms are using and trying to figure out how to--how to stop this.

But the piece that's missing is if a user liked or shared something that--some payload from a Russian troll farm, are they notified, and the answer is no. And so I would like to see a more sophisticated notification system that if we're going to change people's behavior and not propagating the payload of a information attack, you've got to be told hey, you did this and you shared something from a Chinese troll farm or a Russian troll farm. And so maybe that change changes individual peoples' behavior.

So that is that is incredibly--obviously separate from the vote tabulation and vote counting, but DHS is working with Secretaries of States, Secretaries of States understand that, so I feel confident in this, but it's the--it's these nation state actors that are trying to get people or to influence the outcome of potential future legislation. That's something that's a little bit--a little bit harder to do.

BLANCHETTE: Just to follow up on that, I was in Taiwan for the election--the presidential election in January and was, you know, Taiwan has been dealing with this onslaught from China, a real aggressive sort of technological threat to hack the election system but also a morale threat of trying to--I think trying to diminish or deteriorate confidence in Taiwan's democracy. What struck me during that--during that period and looking at what Taiwan is doing to push back against this there feels like there's a tension between raising awareness about the threat to your election system and--but as a corollary to that, delegitimizing the electoral system, right?

The more I warn about the threats, the attacks, China, Russia, I can imagine the average voter going well, how much do I really trust this system now? So I wanted to just get your thoughts on do you see that tension existing as we start to raise the alarm bells or ring the alarm bells about China and Russia and what do we do to make sure that we're making sure voters are aware of the risk but still confident that when you go in and you punch the ballot that your vote is still counted?

HURD: And--and I think the outcome matters, right? I think the increase in vote--of people voting in 2018 over 2016 is a good example and even in this COVID environment, I think you're going to see unprecedented turnouts. So I think as long as people are turning out, that's how you--that's how you--that's an indication that people feel comfortable. But we also have to remember the goal of the Russian and the Chinese are the same. It's to erode trust in our Democratic institutions.

And--and the way you erode trust may not be in--in changing a vote from A to B. The--the erosion of trust becomes making everybody do what exactly you just explained. Oh, you can't trust this so should I even go out and do this, right? And--and I think--I think the great thing about the American spirit is that people are going to say, you know, you're not going to prevent me from going out and doing something.

And--and so that tension, while we should be aware of it, I don't see it on the ground. I'm involved in a number of elections across the country and--and--ultimately, it's the individual candidates whose job it is to make sure they're getting people--making sure people are going out to the polls. So the fact that you have thousands of people doing that and we have such a distributed system, I'm not as concerned as--as what we've seen in a place like some Eastern European countries or even our friends in Taiwan.

BLANCHETTE: Yeah, we've got about 14 or so minutes left and I want to pivot too this sort of offensive, what can the United States be doing to invest in the future. Just one final question I think in the same cluster of issues, which is our U.S. educational system is still the world leader here. It is not only contributing to U.S. soft power, but U.S. hard power for innovation. The talent that we are attracting from all over the world.

At the same time, you know, we know that we do have a problem of a very small percentage of individuals coming from abroad who are abusing the system and or engaged in espionage to pilfer and steal IP, which is then turned against the United States. We've seen raising awareness about some of the talent programs that China utilizes here. And again, highlighting that this is a very, very small proportion of individuals who are engaged in nefarious activity.

But as the United States has stepped up its--its defensive posture against some of these threats, there are concerns that we are overreaching, that we're turning away talent. And instead of the old Cold War where it was the United States or that was it, students can now go to Canada, they can go to New Zealand, they can go to Australia, they can go to the UK. Again, thinking about these tensions, do you see one existing between protecting national security and maintaining an open pluralistic competitive education system or do you think this is a this is a challenge that we can face and address pretty--in a pretty straightforward manner?

HURD: The challenge absolutely exists and we must address it. The United States of America has benefited from that brain drain of every other country for the last couple of decades. We need to continue that. The reason our economy has been the most important economy in the world is because we have been a leader in advanced technology. And one of the reasons we have been able to do that is we attract the best and the brightest and they want to come--they want it to become Americans and they want to live in America and they want to contribute to our society, our economy, our way of life. We have to make sure that continues.

If the Chinese government wants to steal our technology, let's steal their engineers, right? Let's steal, you know, let's take--let's go after their top 200 AI researchers and be like, we're going to make you a deal but that you won't be able to say no and you're going to contribute here. Same with quantum. And I think that's the kind of--of perspective that we need to take.

We can manage the risk of people coming--you know, having a young person come in through a--an undergraduate program and the kind of planning that takes years and they're going to be able to be exposed to a--the freedoms and our way of life rather than have to go back to China and deal with some of the realities on the ground there. So we should--we should be prepared and I think we should be way more opening then what we are in order to do with this.

Center for Strategic and International Studies Holds Discussion on Information Warfare and Competition With China

This is a generation defining struggle between the United States of America and the Chinese government on who's going to be a leader in advanced technology. Whoever comes in second place is going to lose and this means we have to attract talent.

A scary stat in--when it comes to venture capital, venture capital is kind of the pointy end of the spear when it comes to capital. In 2006, 80 percent of venture capital was invested in U.S. companies. In 2018, 49 percent and the increase in--the gross increase in the amount of money was like a tenfold increase. In 2006, the top 10 venture capital deals, eight of them were American companies. Two were Chinese.

In 28--in 29--in 2018, excuse me, 3 were American companies top 10 of--of venture capital deals, 5 were Chinese, 1 was Singaporean, the other was an Indonesian. That is a problem. And so we have to make sure people are still wanting to come to the United States because we have the best schools. We have to make sure that we are attracting that talent because there are more--there are more honor students in China then there are all students in the United States of America. Four times the size of our population, and that means we've got to make sure we are attracting the best of the brightest.

And when you look at--Eric Schmidt is running the National Security Commission for Artificial Intelligence, right, and looking at artificial intelligence as national security issue. And some of the recommendations they're coming out with have nothing to do with pure national security. It's saying we've got to have an educated workforce, right? And we do that by educating our own but also by attracting the best and the brightest from--from around the world and we have to pursue those--those two tracks and making sure that our education system is still the best in the world, it really--we've got to be focused on that because there are some other places where you can be going and getting as good as an education if not better outside the United States and that should scare all of us.

BLANCHETTE: Great points. And I want wonder if I could pivot off that now that you're talking about some of the investments the United States needs to be making in a more offensive frame of mind. I wonder if I can pivot now to, just in the remaining few minutes we have here to be thinking about returning to this information space and the Cold War.

If you look back at the history of the Cold War, information warfare, information competition, investments in soft power, investments in open source translation, the United States really felt all in on this and recognizing the importance of the information space in competing with the Soviet Union. It seems like that muscle has atrophied a bit with the United States. That makes sense. The nature of our--our competition and our rivalry has changed certainly a focus on an area you have deep experience in the Middle East where this maybe didn't play as much of a role.

You know, the United States was invested in things like radio free Europe, the U.S. information agency. At a broad level thinking back on how the United States was prosecuting the Cold War against the Soviet Union and that information approach, do you see any lessons that we can be learning today or what we can be borrowing from the toolkit we used for the Cold War that might be opposite we're hopeful as we think about competition with China?

HURD: Look, I think all those elements you talk about are the--we should be using those strategies but make sure we're putting an end to a 2020 or a 21st century context, right? And one of the areas that we're going to have to learn is how do we translate our concepts and ideas, you know, to make sure that it resonates in a very different culture.

Look, I love movies. I watched so many movies. I watch bad movies and I was watching a recent movie about Ip Man. He was--he was--

BLANCHETTE: --Donnie Yen.

HURD: Yeah, yeah. And--and it was it was a movie I think it was Chinese made and some of the concepts, you know, the fight scenes were amazing and all that, but the concepts didn't resonate with me. It was like what point are they trying to make, right? And--and so we have to be mindful that how are we going to articulate our message.

So part of information operations is not--is delivery of the message, right, but making sure that message is--is correct and hits--hits its point. And so--so yes. We should have this. We should have, you know, do we really understand why--why does Hong Kong matter, right? Why--and Hong Kong--Hong Kong matters because with the Chinese do in Hong Kong what the Chinese are going to be doing in Taiwan.

Why does Taiwan matter? Because Taiwan is produces more Silicon wafers and certain kind of chip that powers literally everything that we use. And if we don't have that, right, how is this going to impact this--this generation defining struggle?

And so--so we have to be paying attention to what they're already doing and listening to them. And so how can we make sure that we counter. When you have protesters in Hong Kong, waving the American flag, singing the national anthem, right, usually, you know, the experiences I had in the Middle East as they were burning the flag and--and saying death to America. And so--so that is something that we have to be able to take advantage of.

You need the resources to be able to do that. You need the entities within government to do that. You also need public private partnerships in order to make that happen. And--and so--and that we have a framework that we should look at. And then the question is, how do we adapt those principles and techniques to where we are today.

BLANCHETTE: You know, building a mat, you talked about sort of understanding what's happening in China and understanding our messaging. The proximate reason that we're having this conversation today and the reason that my CSIS colleague Seth Jones and I are spending so much time on this information space is we--we originally came to this because we noticed that most of the interesting stuff that--the Chinese government or the Communist Party is saying about military strategy about its political strategy is--is encrypted in Chinese language, right? It's not being translated.

And this, in contradistinction to the Cold War where we had, you know, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service or FBIS, which then transformed into the open source enterprise but which--which dwindled and atrophied, Seth I really are trying to emphasize the role in open source and translation. And when you mentioned China is a frenemy, we should be having every Xi Jinping speech translated into English within 24 hours.

You notice that a few key documents like the made in China 2025 plan, which--which you know, Inshallah was translated into English by The Chinese government has done more to shift the awareness from foreign businesses and us here. The 19th party Congress speech, which Xi Jinping gave where he articulated this big grant vision for rejuvenation by 2049 and a world class military and comprehensive national power, you know, thank the Lord that was all translated to English. But so I wanted to ask you, do you see a gap as well in our investments in open source here and what should we be doing to close this gap in terms of investments in and outside of government?

HURD: Look, you're absolutely right and we shouldn't have this gap, especially with where--where machine language and language programming is getting in to be able to have some of the--some of these translations happen quickly and somebody go through and edit it. This is--you're absolutely right. And I think there was a shift when you read them saying things themselves, that is what has changed the perspective--the perspective of folks up here in Washington.

I actually think there's--there's only a handful of truly bipartisan or maybe--nonpartisan may be the right word in the threat of China, right, in cyber security I think are those--are those two. And part of that is from learning and understanding what they--what they're actually saying.

So--so you're right. When we look at--when we think about research dollars, not just research dollars in these advanced technologies that we're going to need to master in order to keep our economy the strongest economy in the world, but it's like what are those--what are those technologies that are going to help us that are better understand our threat, right, and how--how we're going to better understand our adversaries. And that starts with natural language processing and that's something that we should be doing more on and--and making sure that we are going getting things translated.

I tried to get a document. Thank God we have the Congressional Research Service that was that it took me forever to say, okay, what does this actually say? I want a better translation ban--than what I had. And--but to your point, when we hear what they say, rights, it makes it--it's--it's more impactful.

But yes, there is so many areas. But that means we've got to make tough decisions. And we need to be making sure that when federal dollars are being used for research that that research is being made available to other folks, right? And so even if it's a private institution, that ultimately is--getting those federal dollars for that research, that information should be made available (INAUDIBLE) so that we can capitalize on those federal dollars.

BLANCHETTE: We said we'd only keep you for 30 minutes and I notice we're at 30 minutes and 20 seconds, but I wonder if I can sneak in a final question here. You're granted, you know, one wish and this will help The United--position the United States to compete and ultimately be victorious in this long-term competition with China. What's the thing you look at that you say when we write the history of how we were successful, what will be the element that will explain it and what would you like to see happen?

HURD: Every 4th grader is--is--coding is introduced to every 4th grader. I think that is--that is something that will change--that would change our trajectory.

BLANCHETTE: Well, as--as befits your--your reputation and personality, that is both a--a imminently practical, yet blue sky desire for the United States. But you know Congressman Hurd, really wanted to thank you for taking time out today.

I know you're moving on to different ways of serving the country in the future, but your--your bipartisanship, your pragmatism, your principled stands on these issues will--will sorely be missed. But I'm sure you will be a prominent and important voice in these discussions in these debates moving forward. So again, I wanted to thank you for your service, thank you for your time today.

HURD: No, I appreciate you. These kinds of back and forth conversations--you gave me a lot of things to think about as well. And my goal is, you know, I'm finishing up Congress and trying to do this national strategy and artificial intelligence so this is one area of the United States stays a leader in, but I plan on staying involved in that--intersection of technology, national security, and foreign policy. So I really do appreciate the opportunity and best of luck with the rest of the conversations.

BLANCHETTE: Great. Thank you very much.

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