

# COVID Information Warfare and the Future of Great Power Competition

SASCHA-DOMINIK DOV BACHMANN,  
DOOWAN LEE, AND ANDREW DOWSE

## ABSTRACT

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

**Sascha-Dominik Dov Bachmann** is a Professor in Law at the University of Canberra and Fellow NATO SHAPE Asia Pacific (Hybrid Threats and Lawfare). He is a regular contributor to NATO's Legal Advisor Web (LAWFAS). He acted as NATO SME (Cyber and Rule of Law) for the 2011 Countering Hybrid Threats Experiment in Tallinn, Estonia and The Hague. He is also a regular visiting lecturer at the Australian Defence Force's Information Operations Staff Officer Course as guest of the Directorate of Joint Influence Activities of the Information Warfare Division of Australian Department of Defence's Joint Capability Group.

**Doowan Lee** is a senior director of research and strategy at Zignal Labs who leads collaborative research and engagements with public sector stakeholders. Before joining Zignal Labs, Lee served as a professor and principal investigator at the Naval Postgraduate School where he developed and executed federally funded analytic projects on collaborative information systems and the network dynamics of ideological diffusion. He completed his doctoral studies at the University of Chicago while interning at the Argonne National Laboratory and the Santa Fe Institute.

**Andrew Dowse AO** is a former Australian Air Force two-star officer at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth, Australia. He is the head of Defence Research at ECU and leads their Information Warfare program.

## COVID-19 AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION

COVID-19 (or coronavirus) has ushered in a new era of heightened competition among major powers. The pandemic's impact has far exceeded national security and public health. In addition to COVID-19 as a global health emergency, we see increasing weaponization<sup>1</sup> of the pandemic by both the Kremlin and the CCP to achieve strategic goals. Unfortunately, our own resilience to oppose such aggressive acts remains under-matched.

*In addition to COVID-19 as a global health emergency, we see increasing weaponization of the pandemic by both the Kremlin and the CCP to achieve strategic goals. Unfortunately, our own resilience to oppose such aggressive acts remains under-matched.*

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

## INFORMATION WARFARE DURING COVID-19

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

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

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

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

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

## THE CCP'S INFORMATION WARFARE DOCTRINE

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

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

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

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

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

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

.....  
*However, the coronavirus pandemic has also demonstrated the limits of the Three Warfares, with widespread disbelief of the Chinese propaganda offering alternative views of the coronavirus’ origin.*  
 .....

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

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

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

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

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

Second, we note elevated levels of artificial amplification,<sup>26</sup> employed by the CCP and the Kremlin. They appear to exploit bots, trolls, and syndicated news outlets that can propagate their narratives with much more haste than fact-checkers could anticipate. Third, we are also alarmed by an implicit or tacit convergence of like-minded actors along ideological lines, which appears to mirror the current political decoupling we see around the globe. It appears Larry Diamond’s warnings about illiberal winds<sup>27</sup> at least partially prophesied their number during the COVID pandemic.

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

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

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

We must treat disinformation as a full-spectrum problem set. We must go beyond mitigation, become more proactive, and move from passive defense to active defense in these domains. We must promote public-private partnerships in the U.S. and among its partners to harvest and integrate the best solutions in support of influence competition and strategic communication. These solutions, in turn, will viably support diplomacy—as highlighted by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s public support for Australia as a strategic partner<sup>28</sup>—and will offer concrete economic steps such as funding of vaccines research at home and in collaboration with partner nations.<sup>29</sup>

Countering the information warfare threat from our adversaries must account for the vulnerabilities caused by the current pandemic and its human and economic cost. It must also aim to actively contain and push back on CCP’s plan for a new Global Order.<sup>30</sup> Resembling our generation’s greatest threat, we need to ensure that our nations are not vulnerable to economic coercion and political interference by the CCP. Our future relations with the PRC must come from a position of unity and strength<sup>31</sup> and not one of weakness. *f*

## ENDNOTES

- 1 “How China weaponizes COVID-19 in the East Vietnam Sea,” *VNexplorer*, April 26, 2020, <<https://vnexplorer.net/how-china-weaponizes-covid-19-in-the-east-vietnam-sea-a202029303.html>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 2 Stefan Halper, “China: The Three Warfares,” Study Report, May 2013, <<https://cryptome.org/2014/06/prc-three-wars.pdf>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 3 Munoz Mosquera and Sascha Dov-Dominik (Dov) Bachmann, “How China Uses Strategic Preconditioning in the Age of Great Power Competition,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, May 18, 2020, <<https://www.fletcherforum.org/home/2020/5/13/how-china-uses-strategic-preconditioning-in-the-age-of-great-power-competition>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 4 Sascha Dov Bachmann, Andrew Dowse, and Hakan Gunneriusson, “Competition Short of War – How Russia’s Hybrid and Grey-Zone Warfare Are a Blueprint for China’s Global Power Ambitions,” *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies* 1(1) (2019) <[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3483981](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3483981)> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 5 Pep Escobar, “China updates its ‘Art of (Hybrid) War’,” *Asia Times*, May 19, 2020, <<https://asiatimes.com/2020/05/china-updates-its-art-of-hybrid-war/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).



- 6 Brad Allenby, "Weaponized Narrative Is the New Battlespace," *Defense One*, January 3, 2017 <<https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2017/01/weaponized-narrative-new-battlespace/134284/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 7 H. R. McMaster, "How China sees the World – And How we should see China," *The Atlantic*, May 2020, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/05/mcmaster-china-strategy/609088/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 8 Lachlan Markay, "Autocrats and Their Allies Use Coronavirus to Burnish U.S. Image," *Daily Beast*, May 14, 2020 <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/autocrats-and-their-allies-use-coronavirus-to-burnish-us-image>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 9 "'Too soon, too loud:' China's Wolf Warrior diplomacy is backfiring," *Democracy Digest*, May 14, 2020 <<https://www.demdigest.org/defend-democratic-norms-to-counter-chinas-expanding-malign-influence/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 10 Zak Doffman, "Chinese Military Cyber Spies just Caught Crossing a 'Very Dangerous' New Line," May 7, 2020 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/zakdoffman/2020/05/07/chinese-military-cyber-spies-just-caught-crossing-a-very-dangerous-new-line/#56ee84fb2ab3>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 11 Alan Weedon, "China's coronavirus supplies are being rejected – how do we ensure quality in a pandemic," <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-04/china-coronavirus-covid-19-medical-supplies-recalled-regulation/12105110?nw=0>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 12 "China's post-covid propaganda push," *The Economist*, April 16, 2020, <<https://www.economist.com/china/2020/04/16/chinas-post-covid-propaganda-push>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 13 Mark Scott, "Russia and China push 'fake news' aims at weakening Europe: report," *Politico*, January 1, 2020, <<https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-china-disinformation-coronavirus-covid19-facebook-google/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 14 Ramadan Alpout, "EU collapse brought as close as possible," May 12, 2020, <<https://www.idelreal.org/a/30584883.html>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 15 Sangkuk Lee, "China's 'Three Warfares': Origins, Applications, and Organizations," 37 (2) *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37(2), April 17, 2014, <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2013.870071>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Timothy A. Walton, "China's Three Warfares," *Delex Special Report*, January 18, 2012 <<http://www.delex.com/data/files/Three%20Warfares.pdf>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 18 Jonathan Pryke & Richard McGregor, "China's Coronavirus Aid to Pacific Islands is part of a Geopolitical Game," *Lowy Institute*, Commentary, April 23, 2020 <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/china-coronavirus-aid-pacific-islands-part-geopolitical-game>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 19 Marc A. Thiessen, "China is using covid-19 to throttle Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement," *The Washington Post*, May 22, 2020 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/05/21/china-is-using-covid-19-throttle-hong-kongs-pro-democracy-movement/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 20 Michael Sainsbury, "China uses COVID cover to push on with South China Sea expansion," *Crikey*, May 13, 2020 <<https://www.crikey.com.au/2020/05/13/china-uses-covid-cover-to-push-on-with-south-china-sea-expansion/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 21 Erin Hale, "In shadow of coronavirus, China steps up manoeuvres near Taiwan," *Al Jazeera*, April 23, 2020 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/shadow-coronavirus-china-steps-manoevres-taiwan-200422011542456.html>> (accessed May 15, 2020).

- 22 Sarah Cook, "Welcome to the New Era of Chinese Government Disinformation," *The Diplomat*, <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/welcome-to-the-new-era-of-chinese-government-disinformation/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 23 Ashley Townsend, "China's Pandemic-Fueled Standoff with Australia," *War On The Rocks*, May 20, 2020 <<https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/chinas-pandemic-fueled-standoff-with-australia/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 24 Devin Thorne, "AI-Powered Propaganda and the CCP's Plan for Next-Generation 'Thought Management'," *The Jamestown Foundation – China Brief*, Volume 20(9), May 15, 2020 <<https://jamestown.org/program/ai-powered-propaganda-and-the-ccps-plans-for-next-generation-thought-management/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 25 "Number of terrorist attacks in 2018, by country," *Statista Research Department*, November 19, 2019 <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/236983/terrorist-attacks-by-country/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 26 Peter Suci, "COVID-19 Misinformation Remains Difficult To Stop On Social Media," *Forbes*, April 17, 2020 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuci/2020/04/17/covid-19-misinformation-remains-difficult-to-stop-on-social-media/#5631b2b54819>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 27 Larry Diamond, "Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency," Stanford University, *Book Review*, 2019 <<https://diamond-democracy.stanford.edu/publications/ill-winds-saving-democracy-russian-rage-chinese-ambition-and-american-complacency>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 28 Matthew Knott, "'We stand with Australia': Mike Pompeo hits out at China threat," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 21, 2020 <<https://www.smh.com.au/world/north-america/we-stand-with-australia-mike-pompeo-hits-out-at-china-threats-20200521-p54uzz.html>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 29 "Trump's Operation Warp Speed: Hopes of coronavirus vaccine by end of year," *Sky News*, May 16, 2020 <<https://news.sky.com/story/trumps-operation-warp-speed-hopes-of-coronavirus-vaccine-by-end-of-year-11989190>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 30 Kurt M Campbell and Rush Doshi, "The Coronavirus Could Reshape Global Order," *Foreign Affairs*, March 18, 2020 <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-03-18/coronavirus-could-reshape-global-order>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 31 Tasha Levy, "INSIGHT: Australia's relationship with China – Andrew Hastie MP," *Defence Connect*, March 19, 2020 <<https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/key-enablers/5792-insight-australia-s-relationship-with-china-andrew-hastie-mp>> (accessed May 15, 2020).



Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.