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COMPARING THE EVOLUTION, FORM, AND FUNCTION OF RUSSIAN AND CHINESE
INFORMATION OPERATIONS

by Briana Katherine Berger Slowinski and Marissa Jeannette Skulsky

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
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We would like to acknowledge how the ongoing situation between Russia and Ukraine is ever evolving, and this work is contextually current regarding the conflict as of April 1, 2023.

ABSTRACT
COMPARING THE EVOLUTION, FORM, AND FUNCTION OF RUSSIAN AND CHINESE
INFORMATION OPERATIONS

Russia and China are critical actors who deploy far-reaching and impactful information operations in pursuit of their national interests. Their use of information operations is multifaceted and should be subject to study due to how influential these operations are and how significant the effects can be. In pursuit of this knowledge, the aim of this study was to conduct an in-depth analysis of these two countries' information operations and how their operations differ. The first area analyzed was the evolution of these countries' modern day information operations, primarily looking for the factors and historical context which influenced the development of their information operations. The modern day form of these information operations was then examined using the Chinese model of the Three Warfares, which is broken down into legal, psychological, and media warfare. After evaluating these nations through this lens, the common goals, targets, and narrative themes of Russian and Chinese information operations were able to be identified. A cross comparison of the evolution, form, and function of two nation's information operations was conducted and this found that both nations utilize information operations to either support physical action or replace the use of physical action. While both nations use information operations to maintain and grow their influence, Russia uses these operations to suppress Western power and China uses them to protect its reputation.

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Introduction

Historically, a testament of an individual's power was their ability to control the perceptions of the world around them. With the increasing accessibility and exchange of information in today's world, some institutions seek to control and corrupt it for their own purposes. From censorship to propaganda, controlling access to information can rally people for or against a cause, even causing or stopping wars. Formal information operations exist as a recognized effort by a country to control the flow of information to meet the country's goals. It is important to understand and study the use of information operations so we can better recognize when they are used on us and prevent them from working effectively. The intended goal of this work is to evaluate why countries choose information operations, how they have changed in recent history, and what form and function they serve today. We selected to study Russia and China due to their notoriety and scale of information operations. These two countries are major players in the realm of information operations, and therefore, it is vital to have a comprehensive understanding of their information operations usage. This work is written from a United States national security perspective, and thus it is based on the assessment that these two countries' information operations are intended for nefarious purposes.

Executive Summary

Russia and China utilize information operations over other influence methods due to their unique ability to both support and stand in place of physical action. Although Russia and China conduct information operations in similar ways, both nations have independent goals

which they wish to achieve, which then dictate the independent path of their information operations.

- Russia and China both developed the use of censorship to control their internal information spheres. They extended this use to the international information sphere, where, after initial setbacks, both countries became more effective by embracing modern media formats.
- Russia utilizes “legal warfare” to expand its territories, while China uses “legal warfare” to suppress dissent. Russia uses “psychological warfare” to cause disruptions in adversarial countries during periods of change, while China uses it primarily to protect its reputation. While Russia uses an overwhelming approach to “media warfare,” China is more deliberate and covert in its use of it.¹
- Russia's goal in using information operations is to maintain and grow its influence while weakening the power of the West; China's goals are to uphold a positive reputation and grow its economic influence. China often targets the Chinese diaspora and its neighboring countries and silences its critics, while Russia targets political extremes, religious Christians, and ethnic Russians. Russian narratives include anti-West and pro-Russia sentiments, alterations of history, and partial or total falsehoods, while Chinese narratives include maintaining a favorable reputation of itself while quelling dissent.

¹ See below for a definition of the “Three Warfares” model, which includes “legal warfare,” “psychological warfare,” and “media warfare.”

Research Questions

To guide the research, the following main research question was developed along with three sub-questions:

Why do Russia and China utilize information operations over other influence methods to promote their goals and expand their sphere of influence?

1. What factors influenced the evolution of these countries' information operations and how they choose to use them?
2. What tools are most used for the purpose of propagating these actors' covert disinformation campaigns?
3. What general themes and patterns can be identified from these nation's use of information operations?

These questions were chosen because the sub-questions supported the main question by outlining a clear methodology that could be investigated throughout the course of this research. The main question and the countries included were selected due to their prominence in current events related to information operations and how it relates to current national security issues.

Key Definitions

Disinformation vs. Propaganda

Disinformation includes the intentional creation and dissemination of false information. Propaganda is the intentional and methodical propagation of ideas and information that may

contain some truth, but its main purpose is to support a particular point of view in order to instill a certain attitude or response to target audiences.²

Information Operations vs. Disinformation Campaigns

Information Operations includes all attempts by a foreign state to exert influence over an adversary by targeting decision making, encompassing the use of propagating, manipulation, or distortion of information.³ Disinformation campaigns are a subtype of information operation that specifically involves the dissemination of false or misleading narratives.

Information Sphere

The information sphere, sometimes called the infosphere, refers to the totality of all information that exists and all who contribute and access that information.⁴ In the context of this paper, it specifically refers to all the information that is being exchanged and spread. This encompasses news media, social media, journal articles, government statements, and the Internet as a whole.

Research Methodology

The research for this thesis was conducted through the course of several phases. First was the general brainstorming phase where a general topic was selected, which for this project was Information Operations. After the general topic was selected, a period of literature review was

² Matthews, Miriam, Katya Migacheva, and Andrew Brown. 2021. "Russia and China: Superspreaders of Malign and Subversive Information on COVID-19." RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA112-11.html.

³ "Information Environment: DOD Operations Need Enhanced Leadership and Integration of Capabilities." 2021. GAO. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-525t>.

⁴ Allen, Patrick D., and Dennis P. Gilbert. 2010. "Qualifying the Information Sphere as a Domain." *Journal of Information Warfare* 9 (3): 39-50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26487457>.

conducted and from there a set of research questions were developed. Then a more thorough literature review was conducted, using the questions to guide the criteria for source selection. That led to the selection of specific cases related to each country being examined. Case studies reviewed in this project were identified and chosen by the following criteria: prevalence in the literature and data, significance to answering the questions, and reliability of the narrative provided.

The examination of the case studies used in modern Russian and Chinese information operations are modeled after what Dean Cheng at the Heritage Foundation calls China's "three warfare" model. This model is an extension of China's overall warfare strategy, and is conducted via a combination of legal warfare, psychological warfare, and media and public opinion warfare. Legal warfare encompasses a country's effort to give a legal basis to its actions through national and international courts. Psychological warfare has the goal of influencing, constraining, or altering an opponent's thoughts, emotions, and habits. Finally, media or public opinion warfare refers to overt and covert media manipulation to influence perceptions and attitudes.⁵ Although this model is based on a Chinese strategy, we chose to apply it to Russian activities as well, so that a more direct comparison between the two can be made, allowing for clearer analysis of specific case studies. As China and Russia both conduct information operations for strategic purposes, this model allowed for both the similarities and differences of these countries' methodologies to become apparent.

⁵ Cheng, Dean. 2013. "Winning Without Fighting: The Chinese Psychological Warfare Challenge." The Heritage Foundation. https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/winning-without-fighting-the-chinese-psychological-warfare-challenge/#_ftn3.

Source Summary Statement

Throughout the literature review process, the quality of the sources chosen was strictly monitored to ensure that they were credible. Many sources are from well-known and peer reviewed outlets, such as think tanks, civil society organizations, and academia. The sources that were the most impactful in the development of key judgments originated from think tanks, specifically the RAND Corporation, the Wilson Center, and the Atlantic Council, which are well-regarded in the field of international affairs and foreign policy. Governmental sources were also useful for both the literature review and for data analysis in this project, and they were used with the understanding that they may contain implicit biases. Articles from news sources were used mainly for contextual information about what was happening at the time of a case study.

Russia

Russia is notorious for its use of information operations globally. From its closest neighbors to the opposite side of the world, Russian information operations have a broad reach. Russia has evolved its information operations tools over time while maintaining the same goals and reasoning behind their use. As technology has evolved, Russian information operations have transitioned to largely utilizing the internet to spread disinformation, though traditional media still plays a significant role in these operations. Today, Russian information operations can be viewed through the lens of all three warfares as Russia conducts information operations in the legal, psychological, and media and public opinion fields. These warfares often take the form of loose legal justification for military actions, taking advantage of pre-existing psychological divides in societies, and overwhelming the information sphere through various media. The goals, narratives, and targeted groups can help identify these information operations and their use. The main goals of the operations are to sustain Russia's power and eliminate threats to Russia. The narratives are often pro-Russia and anti-West, but many also have no basis in fact at all. Many target groups share some kind of identity with Russia, such as beliefs, language, religion, or background.

Evolution of Information Operations

Even through the rise of the digital age, one thing has remained constant: Russian (or previously Soviet) efforts to influence other countries and their own citizens through information operations. However, both internal and external information operations were forced to evolve and adapt to remain relevant and effective for their time periods. Controlling the internal

information sphere of the Soviet Union and continuing to do so in modern Russia took significant effort, censorship, and historical revisions, as it aimed to keep the government of a large country securely in power. External information operations began during the Soviet Union to counter foreign powers and continue today for similar reasons. Russian information operations initially faltered as the age of the Internet began but quickly rebounded as Russian services embraced new technologies.

Internal Information Operations

Throughout the existence of the Soviet Union, the Soviet government took steps to restrict citizens' access to outside information, particularly when it would damage the Soviet Union's reputation. From its early days, the Soviet government created bodies to censor and approve media content before citizens were allowed to see it. As technology and media evolved, so too did the censorship strategies, which took form in an expanding bureaucratic structure. By the mid-1980s, various governmental departments involved in the internal information sphere in Russia existed, divided by the types of content they handled. These departments kept multiplying because of an increasing reach of news media and communication abilities, as well as more types of popular media and new scientific areas of study. These organizations were designed to scrutinize and decide whether media items were fit for public consumption and approve or disapprove them.⁶ The main goal behind censorship was to give the Soviet government control over its image in the minds of its citizens and cement its power from within. It aimed to prevent the spread of discontent and rebellious ideas against the government. Another goal was to rally

⁶ Dewhirst, Martin, and P. Romanov. 1985. "Is There Censorship in the Soviet Union? Methodological Problems of Studying Soviet Censorship." Wilson Center: 7-17.
https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/op201_censorship_soviet_union_golo_vskoy_1985.pdf.

Soviet citizens so they would be suspicious of foreign countries and see them actively working against the Soviet Union. If citizens were focused on external threats, they were less likely to question the actions of their own government.⁷

Today, by encouraging the belief that the rest of the world is against them, the Russian government effectively isolates its citizens from the outside world and encourages them to believe only Kremlin-sponsored messages.⁸ By keeping its own citizens in the dark, Russia can protect itself from outside influence. Russia can minimize any outside influence on its citizens because it keeps a large portion of the media in Russian hands, limits Internet access, and alters how historical facts are taught in schools.⁹ Like in the Soviet Union, the Russian government today uses official bureaucratic bodies to control the flow of information. Increasing dramatically in 2017, these governmental bodies have severely cracked down on citizens' efforts to navigate around censorship through virtual private networks (VPNs) and similar technology.¹⁰ In the state-sponsored media that Russian citizens receive, messages appeal to many common political beliefs in the country, but they all have the same common goals. As with some of its external disinformation campaigns, heightened tension and emotions are exploited to further the credibility of those narratives. Domestic state-sponsored disinformation aims at all populations in Russia, no matter the political background or age, and takes advantage of the poor and religious populations.¹¹

⁷ Dewhirst, Martin, and P. Romanov. 1985. "Is There Censorship in the Soviet Union? Methodological Problems of Studying Soviet Censorship." Wilson Center: 1-4.
https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/op201_censorship_soviet_union_golovskoy_1985.pdf.

⁸ Grace, Perri. 2022. "Inside Russia's Domestic Disinformation Ecosystem - Inkstick." Inkstick Media.
<https://inkstickmedia.com/inside-russias-domestic-disinformation-ecosystem/>.

⁹ Giles, Keir. 2016. "Handbook of Russian Information Warfare." NATO Defense College: 27-30.
<https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=995>.

¹⁰ "Russia: Growing Internet Isolation, Control, Censorship." 2020. Human Rights Watch.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/18/russia-growing-internet-isolation-control-censorship>.

¹¹ Grace, Perri. 2022. "Inside Russia's Domestic Disinformation Ecosystem - Inkstick." Inkstick Media.
<https://inkstickmedia.com/inside-russias-domestic-disinformation-ecosystem/>.

During the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia carefully limited what its citizens could see and access about it. Russian citizens have been fed numerous biased and blatantly false narratives about the events, which have intensified over the course of the conflict. One of these narratives includes the claim that the average Ukrainian citizen was in fact happy to see Russian troops arrive, as they believed that they were being helped and liberated by the Russian troops.¹² False narratives such as this are designed to decrease the likelihood that individual Russian citizens would protest the war and increase the likelihood that citizens would support the cause. Early in the war, Russia began restricting and censoring outside influences that could jeopardize the narrative it sells to its citizens, similar to how the Soviet Union did. It did so by blocking Western-owned social media, like Instagram, to prevent its citizens from knowing the whole truth, or at least other perspectives.¹³

The Russian government has made a considerable effort to expose children to pro-Russia and anti-West propaganda early in their lives. The Soviet government also recognized the importance of youth outreach when it established the Young Pioneers Organization in 1922, a group similar to the Boy Scouts which remained functional until 1990.¹⁴ Russian State-owned media company Russia Today (RT) compares the Young Pioneers to other nationalistic scouting groups of the era, except it teaches about “Soviet ideals about society and a young person’s role in it.” Under the Soviet government, the Young Pioneers ran state-sponsored summer camps and other events, which functioned for “instilling patriotism and ideological education” in children

¹² Clark, Nell. 2022. “Here's how propaganda is clouding Russians' understanding of the war in Ukraine.” NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/15/1086705796/russian-propaganda-war-in-ukraine>.

¹³ Clark, Nell. 2022. “Here's how propaganda is clouding Russians' understanding of the war in Ukraine.” NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/15/1086705796/russian-propaganda-war-in-ukraine>.

¹⁴ Dmitriev, Oleg. n.d. “Pioneers – Russiapedia of Russian origin.” Russiapedia. Accessed March 13, 2023. <https://russiapeda.rt.com/of-russian-origin/pioneers/>.

ages 10-15.¹⁵ Beginning in 1956, children from other countries, including the United States, also attended these camps with the intention of making them more friendly to the Soviet Union.¹⁶ While not part of the Young Pioneers anymore, Russian children's summer camps are still open today and function largely for the same purposes. One of the most notable camps, Camp Artek in Crimea, still operates and has received an influx of funding since 2014 to upgrade its facilities and provide free tuition to children; however, the Russian government claims that it does not serve the same purpose of indoctrination as it had before.¹⁷ These efforts to indoctrinate children have even received an update for the digital age. The Kremlin offers a game on its official government website, kids.kremlin.ru, to craft a narrative to support Russian military supremacy in the face of intimidating and threatening adversaries. This game was notably updated with military-centric messages in 2014, corresponding to the annexation of Crimea and support for the insurgency in Ukraine.¹⁸ These messages are hidden inside brightly colored and interactive animations to appeal to children.

External Information Operations

The Soviet operational concept for externally aimed information operations was called “active measures.” Active measures, translated from the Russian phrase *aktivnyye meropriyatiya*, was a strategic notion used by the Soviet state security service, the KGB, to support Soviet political goals through the use of information operations among other actions.

¹⁵ Dmitriev, Oleg. n.d. “Pioneers – Russiopedia Of Russian origin.” Russiopedia. Accessed March 13, 2023. <https://russiopedia.rt.com/of-russian-origin/pioneers/>.

¹⁶ Pinkowski, Jen. 2020. “Why American Kids Have Been Going to Soviet Sleepaway Camp.” Atlas Obscura. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/camp-artek-soviet-russia>.

¹⁷ Pinkowski, Jen. 2020. “Why American Kids Have Been Going to Soviet Sleepaway Camp.” Atlas Obscura. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/camp-artek-soviet-russia>.

¹⁸ Brandon, Elissaveta M. 2022. “Inside Russia's cartoonish propaganda website made for kids.” Fast Company. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90780446/inside-russias-cartoonish-propaganda-website-made-for-kids>.

According to Mark Galeotti from the Marshall Center, the strategy encompassed the totality of Soviet information operations, including the "establishment of front organizations, the backing of friendly political movements, the orchestration of domestic unrest and the spread of disinformation."¹⁹ One of the primary considerations of this strategy was that it needed to constantly carry out operations because the threat to Soviet power was never-ending, and "the country faces a constant and covert threat of subversion from outside."²⁰ One of the most visible uses of this strategy was the release of defamatory statements and disinformation against the United States, the KGB's declared "main enemy," to combat American political power. Modern Russia accepted a version of this strategy, known today as "measures of support," to achieve its goals and maintain its power. Even as technology evolved, Russian covert information operations remained a core tenet and strategy which guides the continuous use of information operations today.

Some Soviet-era false narratives are eerily similar to the ones Russia spreads today. For example, the Soviet Union conducted a covert action in the 1980s that blamed the United States military for purposefully releasing the AIDS virus, which echoes Russian rumors surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹

In early August 2008, a five-day war erupted between Russia and Georgia over the sovereignty of two Georgian provinces, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.²² Specifically, Keir Giles

¹⁹ Galeotti, Mark. 2019. "Active Measures: Russia's Covert Geopolitical Operations." George C. Marshall European Center For Security Studies. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/active-measures-russias-covert-geopolitical-operations-0>.

²⁰ Galeotti, Mark. 2019. "Active Measures: Russia's Covert Geopolitical Operations." George C. Marshall European Center For Security Studies. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/active-measures-russias-covert-geopolitical-operations-0>.

²¹ Ewing, Philip. 2017. "Russia's Election Meddling Part of A Long History of 'Active Measures.'" NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/23/528500501/lies-forgery-and-skulduggery-the-long-history-of-active-measures>.

²² "2008 Georgia Russia Conflict Fast Facts." 2014. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2014/03/13/world/europe/2008-georgia-russia-conflict/index.html>.

cited this war as the point where Russia realized that its information operations strategies needed to shift gears and embrace the Internet to keep its relevance and capabilities.²³ The war with Georgia catalyzed the expansion and evolution of Russian information operations. The information operations used during that war aimed to justify Russian actions but were largely unsuccessful. Due to the general ineffectiveness of their information operations throughout this conflict in convincing surrounding nations to join their side, or at least see its point of view, Russia founded “Information Troops.”²⁴ This troop is a group within the Russian military tasked with carrying out information operations to support its military agenda through the Internet and media. This group serves to emphasize Russia’s physical military strength with messages of support and to spread values that agree with the Russian stance. According to Giles, these troops aim to diminish the perceived inadequacies of Russia’s technical and psychological information operation capabilities.²⁵

Another central turning point in Russia’s modernization of its information operations was the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Russia’s support for an insurgency in Ukraine. The response to this conflict in the international information sphere was stronger, more unified, and more coordinated than that of Georgia six years prior. As time progressed, more and more individuals gained access to social media, including Russian soldiers who were actively fighting in Ukraine at the time, so there exists more documentation of the incident, which Russia could further

²³ Giles, Keir. 2016. “Handbook of Russian Information Warfare.” NATO Defense College: 33-36. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=995>.

²⁴ Giles, Keir. 2011. ““Information Troops” – a Russian Cyber Command?” NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence: 45-56. <http://195.222.11.251/uploads/2018/10/InformationTroopsARussianCyberCommand-Giles.pdf>.

²⁵ Giles, Keir. 2011. ““Information Troops” – a Russian Cyber Command?” NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence: 45-56. <http://195.222.11.251/uploads/2018/10/InformationTroopsARussianCyberCommand-Giles.pdf>.

manipulate.²⁶ In the days immediately preceding the annexation of Crimea, Russia laid a strong foundation on the information front to support the effort, and Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU, was particularly instrumental in this effort.²⁷ One of the new tactics seen in that effort, which continues to be used in many Russian information operations today, was the creation of fake profiles that attempted to seem legitimate on social media websites. These accounts posed as Ukrainian citizens and actively engaged with citizens of other countries, and even paid to promote their posts.²⁸ Giles asserts that Russia understood in 2008 that its information operations were inadequate and had not evolved for this new Internet age. Post-2008, it took steps to strengthen the capabilities of its information operations by directly tying them to the military, so that when the next conflict came, Russia would be prepared.²⁹

Russia also bolsters its physical activity through mercenaries, like the Wagner Group, and utilizes information operations to downplay the relationship between Russia and these groups. The Wagner Group is a private military organization that often operates in conjunction with the Russian military. The group is notorious for its many human rights violations, including the 2022 large-scale massacre of Malian civilians.³⁰ Private militaries are not legal in Russia, and the Wagner Group and the Russian military maneuver around this law by simply facilitating and

²⁶ Giles, Keir. 2011. "“Information Troops” – a Russian Cyber Command?" NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence: 45-56. <http://195.222.11.251/uploads/2018/10/InformationTroopsARussianCyberCommand-Giles.pdf>.

²⁷ Nakashima, Ellen. 2017. "Inside a Russian disinformation campaign in Ukraine in 2014." The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-a-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-ukraine-in-2014/2017/12/25/f55b0408-e71d-11e7-ab50-621fe0588340_story.html.

²⁸ Nakashima, Ellen. 2017. "Inside a Russian disinformation campaign in Ukraine in 2014." The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-a-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-ukraine-in-2014/2017/12/25/f55b0408-e71d-11e7-ab50-621fe0588340_story.html.

²⁹ Giles, Keir. 2011. "“Information Troops” – a Russian Cyber Command?" NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence: 45-56. <http://195.222.11.251/uploads/2018/10/InformationTroopsARussianCyberCommand-Giles.pdf>.

³⁰ Doxsee, Catrina, and Jared Thompson. 2022. "Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group's Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali." CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>.

operating the group from abroad, which allows it to act as a “proxy” for the Russian military, according to media analysis.³¹ Russia officially downplays the relationship between the Wagner Group and the Russian military; however, the Center for Strategic and International Studies reported that a base in Molkino, Russia, “is operated jointly by the 10th Separate Special Purpose Brigade of Russia’s GRU and the Wagner Group,” which was first noted in 2018.³² Russia uses the Wagner Group to act physically on its behalf as a proxy force; however, the Russian government has not overtly acknowledged the extent of this relationship or how much, if any, funding Wagner receives from the Kremlin.³³ If Russia does not directly implicate itself in these crimes, it cannot be legally and reputationally tied to them. This strategy allows Russia to protect the image it projects outwards, claiming great things about its humanitarian deeds while still brutally enforcing its goals. Another facet of the Russian government’s use of the Wagner Group is to operate information operations. Recently in Africa, the Wagner Group utilized disinformation campaigns to influence elections in Madagascar in 2018, disguise the theft of natural resources, and create anti-French sentiment in Mali in 2022.³⁴

³¹ Inskepp, Stephen, and András Rácz. 2023. “Examining the Wagner Group, a private military company that Russia has relied on.” NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/06/1154739417/examining-the-wagner-group-a-private-military-company-that-russia-has-relied-on>.

³² “Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State | The Post-Soviet Post.” 2020. CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state>.

³³ Banco, Erin, Sarah A. Aarup, and Anastasia Carrier. 2023. “Inside the stunning growth of Russia’s Wagner Group.” Politico. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/02/18/russia-wagner-group-ukraine-paramilitary-00083553>.

³⁴ Felbab, Vanda. 2022. “Russia’s Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, commercial concessions, rights violations, and counterinsurgency failure.” Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/08/russias-wagner-group-in-africa-influence-commercial-concessions-rights-violations-and-counterinsurgency-failure/>; “Wagner Group’s Disinformation Campaign Aims to Discredit Democratic Governments.” 2023. Africa Defense Forum. <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/03/wagner-groups-disinformation-campaign-aims-to-discredit-democratic-governments/>.

Modern Russian Information Operations

Modern Russian information operations can be viewed through the model of the three warfares: legal, psychological, and media and public opinion warfare. Russian legal warfare utilizes information operations to provide semi-legal backings for its claims, manipulate windows of opportunity, and establish a hold of the media landscape. To justify military actions, Russia often makes claims with vague legal bases to prove it is taking the moral and legal high ground. Russia does so by claiming an area it is annexing wants to be liberated. Russian psychological warfare preys on periods of transition or heightened tension, like elections and pandemics. These are valuable venues for information operations as they aim at societies' psychological weak points. Information operations aimed at elections help Russia put its allies into power in other countries while also working to destabilize its rivals. COVID-19 pandemic-related information operations enabled Russia to brazenly question its adversaries while portraying itself as stronger and more reliable. Russia typically conducts media and public opinion warfare information operations in digital spaces and on social media. When using media warfare, Russia spreads as much information, or disinformation, as possible to as many individuals as it can reach. These media-based campaigns, whether in a traditional form or digital format, work to back up physical initiatives, like the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Legal Warfare

Russia uses legal warfare in conjunction with other means to provide law-based justifications for Russian decisions and to persuade others and its citizens of the sound reasoning behind its actions. As an information operation, Russia uses this strategy to spin situations, making itself appear as a courageous hero and liberator. Some of the most notable examples of

this in recent years include justifications for Russia's militaristic efforts in Ukraine. As discussed previously, Russia utilized numerous information operations in its 2014 annexation of Crimea to prevent a perceived failure like in 2008 in Georgia and to reinforce its physical efforts. The information operations largely appear to function in order to provide support, give legal standing, and further Russia's physical goals.

Instead of saying that it annexed Crimea in 2014, Russia claims that it liberated the region from the hands of its oppressors. Russia cannot simply take the land without justification without breaking international laws and treaties. Thomas Ambrosio writes that "Russia is legally bound by two documents in which they pledged to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity: the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and the 1997 Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation."³⁵ To navigate around this, Russia asserts that the population of this region wants to secede from Ukraine. That claim provides both moral and legal reasoning for its actions even before it was able to respond militarily. Russia essentially claimed that based on precedent and laws from the United Nations, namely the United Nations charter itself, it assisted Crimea in freeing itself and becoming independent. Russia justified folding Crimea into Russian territory by claiming that Crimea was briefly independent and consciously chose to join Russia.³⁶

The rhetoric used to justify those military efforts is still used today in Russia's invasion of Ukraine beginning in 2022. On February 24, 2022, the day the invasion began, Putin said he invaded for "the protection of people who during eight years, suffer from abuse and genocide

³⁵ Ambrosio, Thomas. 2016. "The rhetoric of irredentism: The Russian Federation's perception management campaign and the annexation of Crimea." Taylor & Francis Online. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2016.1151653?journalCode=fswi20>.

³⁶ Ambrosio, Thomas. 2016. "The rhetoric of irredentism: The Russian Federation's perception management campaign and the annexation of Crimea." Taylor & Francis Online. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2016.1151653?journalCode=fswi20>.

from the Kyiv regime.”³⁷ Since the invasion began, Putin's speeches have continued to use the rhetoric of liberation and independence as legal justifications for his government's actions. A notable audience for these speeches is the Russian population, as the Kremlin uses the speeches to increase the Russian people's faith in the invasion and to suppress protests against Russia's actions internally. Other potential audiences include surrounding countries that may have shared histories and cultures and may receive this kind of military attention in the future or countries that are friendly to Russia with which Russia wants to maintain good relations. The intended psychological impact of these comments is a change in perception, creating a more positive attitude toward Russia's military actions.

To provide further legal justification for these courses of action, Russia often cites historical or longstanding and outdated laws to enforce its points. Mark Voyer cites some of the many historical precedents Russia uses to enforce its military action, including the fact that Empress Catherine the Great signed an official document that recognized the region of Crimea as being a part of the Russian Empire in 1783.³⁸ Russia claims that it is the modern-day successor of that empire and therefore has a right to all its officially incorporated territories, including Crimea, and this law was reinforced in its legal status in Russia in 2018 when it was officially recognized by the Russian Duma.³⁹ Russia uses this far-reaching claim, in conjunction with others, to demonstrate that it believes specifically that the historical unification of Crimea to

³⁷ Apt, Clara. 2023. “Russia’s Eliminationist Rhetoric Against Ukraine: A Collection.” Just Security. <https://www.justsecurity.org/81789/russias-eliminationist-rhetoric-against-ukraine-a-collection/>; Chang, Emily. 2022. “Watch Video of Putin's Speech Ordering Military Operation in Ukraine, With Transcript.” Bloomberg.com. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2022-02-24/putin-orders-special-military-operation-for-ukraine-video-100nw4qc>.

³⁸ Voyer, Mark. 2018. “Russian Lawfare – Russia’s Weaponisation Of International And Domestic Law: Implications For The Region And Policy Recommendations.” *Journal on Baltic Security* 4 (2): 35-45. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jobs-2018-0011>.

³⁹ Voyer, Mark. 2018. “Russian Lawfare – Russia’s Weaponisation Of International And Domestic Law: Implications For The Region And Policy Recommendations.” *Journal on Baltic Security* 4 (2): 35-45. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jobs-2018-0011>.

Russia holds significant weight. Using this logic, Russia can claim legal grounds in annexing all territories once legally held by its predecessors. If this logic were used elsewhere, for example, it would justify a country like the United Kingdom to annex its former colonies that were legally owned by Imperial England and its King hundreds of years ago, regardless of the time past and the wars fought since.

Psychological Warfare

Russian psychological warfare efforts center on taking political and social divisions that already exist in its target countries and exacerbating them. It sees these rifts as major weak spots which it can use to destabilize its adversaries. Two major types of events leave societies vulnerable to this type of attack: scheduled periods of change and sudden disruptions. Election cycles are regularly scheduled opportunities for governments and political landscapes to shift; therefore, Russia sees them as weak spots in the democratic process that it can exploit. Larger disruptive and unexpected events, like a global pandemic, are also periods of heightened tension that leave countries vulnerable to psychological warfare.

Elections are opportune venues for Russia because they are a predictable transitional period in a society when there is abundant change, unrest, and tension. These aspects make election periods a predictable window of opportunity for Russia to influence a society in its favor. In the United States, Russia uses election-oriented information operations to weaken the power and standing of the US. Historically, the Soviet Union targeted United States elections for much of the same reasons but with the additional goal of decreasing the anti-Soviet sentiments of the Cold War.⁴⁰ Russia sees the United States as a rival in all aspects and, therefore, utilizes

⁴⁰ Jones, Seth G. 2019. "Russian Meddling in the United States: The Historical Context of the Mueller Report." CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-meddling-united-states-historical-context-mueller-report>.

election disinformation to diminish its global power and, in relative terms, strengthen Russia's own position on the global stage. With the way the United States political system is set up with its two major parties of opposing beliefs and values, elections are a time of increased tension where individuals on both sides can clash. Russia targets this tension with disinformation campaigns to make the United States more politically unstable and inwardly focused. With the United States preoccupied with its internal turmoil, there is an opportunity for Russia to showcase itself globally as an alternative and potentially more stable global player.⁴¹

Throughout, but especially at the beginning of, the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia made considerable efforts to exploit the worldwide crisis to its own advantage. One of the main ways it did so was by spreading significant quantities of disinformation about the pandemic as widely as possible. To some extent, Russia worked with other countries, like China, to push pandemic narratives about the United States.⁴² The benefit of working with other countries is that the message spreads further and in multiple languages, making it seem more credible. The pandemic presented itself at a particularly politically fragile time in Western countries because of the divisiveness created by the health response and the economic stressors it caused. Russia used this pandemic and the ensuing turmoil as an opportunity to increase internal tensions in the West. One of the major repercussions of COVID-19 centered disinformation was the growth in discontent, animosity, and anger between citizens, governments, and each other. Some of these feelings were already present in Western societies because of elections, supply chain issues, and lockdowns, so Russian information operations did not necessarily cause the feelings but

⁴¹ Jones, Seth G. 2019. "Russian Meddling in the United States: The Historical Context of the Mueller Report." CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-meddling-united-states-historical-context-mueller-report>.

⁴² Lucas, Edward, Ben Dubow, James Lamond, Jake Morris, Corina Rebegea, and Vera Zakem. 2022. "Post-Mortem: Russian and Chinese COVID-19 Information Operations." CEPA. <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/post-mortem-russian-and-chinese-covid-19-information-operations/>.

heightened them. Russia once again was able to use information operations, specifically COVID disinformation in this case, to portray itself as more powerful by attacking the power, influence, and reputation of the United States.⁴³ These information operations also showed Russian citizens how much better their country responded to the crisis than other competing powers.

Many false narratives Russia disseminated during the COVID-19 pandemic focused on the pandemic's origins, with popular conspiracies including a laboratory in an adversarial country deliberately leaked it or that wealthy global elites funded it.⁴⁴ One related narrative Russia pushed accused NATO of purposefully releasing the virus, while other narratives claimed any number of different countries had done it, from China to the United States.⁴⁵ By blaming Western countries for the origin of the pandemic, Russia shaped a narrative that the West is cruel and was thus able to boost its reputation by playing the victim. Russia also criticized Western-made vaccines, sowing doubts about their efficacy to promote its own vaccine, the Sputnik V. By disparaging Western vaccines, Russia tried to gain an economic advantage and sell more of its vaccines, which was largely unsuccessful due to the slow production rate.⁴⁶ However, it did so at the risk of continuously spreading the pandemic and harming its citizens because it created distrust in all vaccines. Regarding the use of Sputnik V by Russian citizens, Robin Emmott writes that the "uptake has been slow, with many Russians citing distrust of the authorities and

⁴³ Lucas, Edward, Ben Dubow, James Lamond, Jake Morris, Corina Rebegea, and Vera Zakem. 2022. "Post-Mortem: Russian and Chinese COVID-19 Information Operations." CEPA. <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/post-mortem-russian-and-chinese-covid-19-information-operations/>.

⁴⁴ Matthews, Miriam, Katya Migacheva, and Andrew Brown. 2021. "Russia and China: Superspreaders of Malign and Subversive Information on COVID-19." RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA112-11.html.

⁴⁵ Whiskeyman, Andrew, and Michael Berger. 2021. "Axis of Disinformation: Propaganda from Iran, Russia, and China on COVID-19." The Washington Institute. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/axis-disinformation-propaganda-iran-russia-and-china-covid-1>.

⁴⁶ Kier, Grace, and Paul Stronski. 2021. "Russia's Vaccine Diplomacy Is Mostly Smoke and Mirrors." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/03/russia-s-vaccine-diplomacy-is-mostly-smoke-and-mirrors-pub-85074>.

fear of new medical products."⁴⁷ The disinformation about vaccine efficacy pushed in Russian information operations backfired, causing Russians to be sicker and trust the Sputnik V less.

Media Warfare

Russia takes an all-encompassing and overwhelming approach to its media warfare tactics. It increases the speed of the spread and the reach of its information operations by using as many platforms as possible, effectively overwhelming the information sphere. These platforms include, but are not limited to, radio stations, talk shows, newspapers, news channels, and social media websites. The overall aim of utilizing these platforms in concert with each other is a strategy that a RAND corporation study nicknamed the “Firehose” method, which aims to disseminate as much information as possible to the largest target audience possible.⁴⁸ Even though Russia disperses narratives simultaneously, many messages do not carry the same meaning or support the same perspective. Russian outlets often publish these articles, tweets, and posts as quickly and as much as possible, either disseminating inconsistent messages or messages that lack “commitment to objective reality.”⁴⁹ After the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 in 2014, Russian narratives suggested multiple seemingly impossible scenarios about how the plane was shot down, including that “the passengers were already dead.”⁵⁰ Some of the

⁴⁷ Emmott, Robin. 2021. “COVID-19 disinformation backfires as Russian deaths climb, EU says.” Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/covid-19-disinformation-backfires-russian-deaths-climb-eu-says-2021-10-21>.

⁴⁸ Paul, Christopher, and Miriam Matthews. 2016. “The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood” Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It | RAND.” RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>.

⁴⁹ Paul, Christopher, and Miriam Matthews. 2016. “The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood” Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It | RAND.” RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>.

⁵⁰ Paul, Christopher, and Miriam Matthews. 2016. “The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood” Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It | RAND.” RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>; Payne, Ed. 2014. “Propaganda war: Russia offers alternate takes to what brought down MH17.” CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2014/07/22/world/europe/malaysia-plane-crash-propaganda-war/index.html>.

stories have little basis in fact or are complete falsehoods and are often sensationalized to attract further readership. When Russia disseminates disinformation through social media, it can make disinformation appear as the opinions of a legitimate person who, in actuality, may not even exist. Additionally, Russia utilizes Russian-state-sponsored TV networks, radio stations, think tanks, and civil society organizations to appeal to the Russian-speaking population outside Russia from a seemingly trustworthy source. This audience is often located in neighboring post-Soviet states, called the “near abroad,” and Russian entities target this group of up to 25 million people “as a means of implementing foreign policy.”⁵¹ The large volume of Russian disinformation overwhelms many different information flows, making it sometimes difficult to avoid, disprove, and prevent, despite bodies like the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence working actively to suppress it.⁵²

Russia utilizes numerous internet and social media channels to support its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, Russia aims disinformation campaigns at EU countries relating to events in Ukraine to confuse their citizens and discourage them from supporting Ukraine. Russia does so with large and overt campaigns using its government-owned news channels (RT and Sputnik), which broadcast in several languages to reach EU citizens from various countries. These efforts led to EU countries placing severe sanctions on those news channels that restrict their ability to broadcast to EU countries in early March 2022.⁵³ The sanctions base the restrictions on the fact that the Russian state directly owns and operates these outlets, and Russia

⁵¹ Sencerman, Öncel. 2018. “Russian Diaspora as a Means of Russian Foreign Policy.” *Military Review*. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/March-April-2018/Sencerman-Russian-Diaspora/>.

⁵² “About Strategic Communications - StratCom COE.” n.d. StratCom | NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Riga, Latvia. Accessed March 14, 2023. https://stratcomcoe.org/about_us/about-strategic-communications/1.

⁵³ “EU imposes sanctions on state-owned outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's broadcasting in the EU.” 2022. Consilium.europa.eu. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>.

is a known producer of disinformation. By late 2022, Russia began noticeably using social media platforms, particularly Facebook, to spread disinformation and falsehoods about Ukrainian refugees that have moved into Western Europe because of the conflict. These Russian efforts aim to further harm Ukrainian refugees by encouraging countries to turn them away. The campaign aimed to make Ukrainian refugees look bad included creating false video content that blamed the refugees for the work of a German serial arsonist, among other crimes; however, the campaigns against the Ukrainian refugees have been largely unsuccessful.⁵⁴ To carry out these campaigns, Russian operatives matched actual news footage with false narratives, which then, because of sensationalist content, like in the arsonist case, proceeded to make the rounds on Twitter, German websites, and Weibo, as well as being broadcast by Russia's state-owned Sputnik news channel.⁵⁵ Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, Russia had strong economic ties with Germany, so it was beneficial for Russia to spread an anti-Ukrainian refugee message there. If Germans can be convinced to be less sympathetic to these refugees, Russia could conceivably further persuade Germany to continue working with Russia.

Media warfare, using news and published media and social media platforms for information operations, also plays a significant role in the Russian information operations that target elections. Specifically, the US 2016 presidential election is one of the most notable occurrences of heavy social media-based disinformation campaigns. Russia uses the atmospheres created on Twitter and Facebook to complement its psychological warfare-based goals, which are to expand its influence while suppressing the reach of its adversaries. The tactics that

⁵⁴ Morris, Loveday, and Will Oremus. 2022. "Russian disinformation aims to turn Germany against Ukrainian refugees." The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/12/08/russian-disinfo-ukrainian-refugees-germany/>.

⁵⁵ Morris, Loveday, and Will Oremus. 2022. "Russian disinformation aims to turn Germany against Ukrainian refugees." The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/12/08/russian-disinfo-ukrainian-refugees-germany/>.

Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) used to spread disinformation on Twitter included posing as Americans, stealing the identities of actual Americans, and receiving tips from actual Americans on which populations to target.⁵⁶ By receiving help from actual Americans, the disinformation produced and spread appeared more like fact than fiction than usual disinformation because it had a more secure basis in the actual attitudes of the targeted people. A study of the Twitter landscape during the 2016 US presidential election discovered that users typically did not directly encounter disinformation straight from the source, but instead, they often saw it after it had been retweeted several times.⁵⁷ The way information can spread rapidly on Twitter simply by retweeting allowed Russian operatives to reach a large audience easily with a single source. By having multiple sources, Russia could increase its audience reach exponentially. During the conflict with Ukraine in 2014, the GRU also paid to promote Facebook posts containing anti-Ukrainian sentiments.⁵⁸ This drastically increases the reach and spread of the content. The ability to pay a social media website to increase the reach of their messages continues to be used to spread disinformation in the years after this conflict. Even though companies do this to showcase products, the issue is that these computerized communications make a source seem even more trustworthy for a reader not reading the content critically.

⁵⁶ Lee, Dave. 2018. "The tactics of a Russian troll farm." BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-43093390>.

⁵⁷ Eady, Gregory, Tom Paskhalis, Jan Zilinsky, Richard Bonneau, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua A. Tucker. 2023. "Exposure to the Russian Internet Research Agency foreign influence campaign on Twitter in the 2016 US election and its relationship to attitudes and voting behavior." *Nature Communications* 14 (62). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-35576-9>.

⁵⁸ Nakashima, Ellen. 2017. "Inside a Russian disinformation campaign in Ukraine in 2014." The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-a-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-ukraine-in-2014/2017/12/25/f55b0408-e71d-11e7-ab50-621fe0588340_story.html.

Criteria of Russian Information Operations

Russian information operations follow a set of criteria that identify whom they seek to reach, what they try to say, and what the overall goal is behind them. Russia uses information operations to weaken rival powers while maintaining and growing its power. Since Russia has such far-reaching information operations, it is only natural that its target audience for disinformation is also far-reaching. When operating disinformation campaigns in a target country, Russia seeks to reach individuals on both extremes of the political spectrum and individuals who share religious beliefs, traditions, heritage, and language with Russia. The main narratives of the disinformation include Russia-friendly messages that are sympathetic to its actions or beliefs, along with messages that are anti-West, against civil rights, or are blatantly false claims.

Goals of Modern Russian Information Operations

An overt aim of Russian information operations is to weaken rival powers and make Russia's reach expand. This goal is largely carried out by observing what divisions already exist in a society and then choosing the appropriate venue to capitalize on them. Not only does this create confusion and discontent, but it also creates doubts about the capabilities of its adversaries on the world stage.⁵⁹ Russia is a powerful nation but finds it necessary to diminish the reputation of other powers to guarantee its own. Another reason Russia uses information operations is not only to expand its influence over others but also to protect the power it already possesses. It does so by crafting operations, messages, and narratives that reach Russia's closest neighbors

⁵⁹ Stricklin, Kasey. 2020. "Why Does Russia Use Disinformation? - Lawfare." Lawfare blog. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/why-does-russia-use-disinformation>.

(typically the post-Soviet states) to maintain its influence over them.⁶⁰ According to Stricklin, Russia needs to maintain a physical buffer between itself and Western countries, so it focuses on influencing the “near abroad” as a layer of protection. Sencerman describes the “near abroad” as a term used to describe the post-Soviet states, countries that used to be a part of the Soviet Union but are now independent, although they share significant historical and cultural similarities to Russia.⁶¹ To keep this buffer, Russia aims to stop the spread of influence from NATO or Western countries into the “near abroad” and prevent another “color revolution.”⁶² A “color revolution” is a swift change in the post-Soviet states away from pro-Russia behaviors, catalyzed by democratic processes like protests and elections.⁶³ Russia fears “color revolutions” because they cause Russia to have considerably less influence over the “near abroad.” Russia works to prevent them by suppressing Western attitudes, which it claims causes them. Therefore, Russia takes considerable steps to limit outside influence in those areas and to craft a positive perception of itself in the eyes of those nations. Even the perceptions among the Russian citizens of their government are important so that the citizenry never questions Russian strength. To keep the Russian government in power, it promotes constant positive messages about government actions and actively suppresses negative ones.

⁶⁰ Cunningham, Conor. 2020. “A Russian Federation Information Warfare Primer - The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies.” Jackson School of International Studies. <https://jsis.washington.edu/news/a-russian-federation-information-warfare-primer/>.

⁶¹ Sencerman, Öncel. 2018. “Russian Diaspora as a Means of Russian Foreign Policy.” *Military Review*. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/March-April-2018/Sencerman-Russian-Diaspora/>

⁶² Stricklin, Kasey. 2020. “Why Does Russia Use Disinformation? - Lawfare.” Lawfare blog. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/why-does-russia-use-disinformation>.

⁶³ Thien, Poh Phaik. 2009. “Explaining the Color Revolutions.” *E-International Relations*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2009/07/31/explaining-the-color-revolutions/>.

Targeted Groups

When spreading disinformation, Russia tends to have specific targets in mind for whom it hopes to influence. Several major groups encompass the majority of the targets of Russian disinformation: the left and right extremes of the political spectrum, religious Christian groups and individuals, and Russian speakers and ethnic Russians.⁶⁴

A notable instance of Russian leftist support is apparent in RT's support of the "occupy movement" in the United States. Casey Michel notes that "RT was one of the few outlets willing to cover the Occupy movement from start to finish."⁶⁵ This movement was a left-leaning protest against the large economic inequalities in the United States.⁶⁶ Russian support of extreme left-leaning political groups has two primary motivations. First, far-left groups' policies sometimes align with traditional Soviet communist policies or contain anti-NATO sentiments and, therefore, may have a level of understanding and sympathy for Russia's struggles. Second, Russian support of these groups fosters tension in the political spaces of target countries, resulting in those countries being less worried about what Russia is doing and more preoccupied with their own internal affairs.

Russia even more overtly supports the extreme right side of the political spectrum in its information operations. Russia itself advocates socially conservative political stances, enabling it to provide a sort of "safe haven" for like-minded individuals from other, especially Western, countries to foster their ideologies and therefore garner more friendly and sympathetic

⁶⁴ Aktürk, Şener. 2019. "Five Faces of Russia's Soft Power: Far Left, Far Right, Orthodox Christian, Russophone, and Ethnoreligious Networks – PONARS Eurasia." PONARS Eurasia. <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/five-faces-of-russia-s-soft-power-far-left-far-right-orthodox-christian-russophone-and-ethnoreligious-networks/>.

⁶⁵ Michel, Casey. 2015. "Putin's Magnificent Messaging Machine - POLITICO Magazine." Politico. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/25/putin-rt-soviet-propaganda-121734/>.

⁶⁶ De Groot, Kristen. 2021. "Ten years later, examining the Occupy movement's legacy | Penn Today." Penn Today. <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/ten-years-later-examining-occupy-movements-legacy>.

perspectives. Furthermore, Russian support for right-leaning politics accomplishes the same goal as Russian information operations promoting left-leaning politics: they create tension in target countries. Russia thrives when other countries are occupied dealing with internal political turmoil.⁶⁷ In an examination of insurgent and fringe political parties in Europe (not all are far-right, but many are), Dennison and Pardijs found that Russia supports smaller European political parties with extreme nationalist beliefs to help them gain momentum, in part to oppose NATO unity and promote Russian power. It was noted that many of the parties examined are against the power of the United States and the European Union and have either sympathies or a willingness to work with Russia.⁶⁸ One of the most notable of these far-right parties that Russia supports is Germany's AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) party, which Russia has supported through the dissemination of propaganda and disinformation to the German population.⁶⁹

Similar to how it targets far-right groups, Russian information operations also target Christian religious groups and individuals. This targeting is mainly because they tend to lean right politically on a larger scale and would thus be more likely to be receptive to the Russian narrative about upholding traditional conservative values.⁷⁰ Religious groups can see the 2022 reinvigoration of Russian laws against "gay propaganda," which Russia has enacted to combat "the destruction of the traditional family unit" and have been praised by the Russian Orthodox

⁶⁷ Grimm Arsenault, Elizabeth, and Joseph Stabile. 2020. "Confronting Russia's Role in Transnational White Supremacist Extremism." Just Security. <https://www.justsecurity.org/68420/confronting-russias-role-in-transnational-white-supremacist-extremism/>.

⁶⁸ Dennison, Susi, and Dina Pardijs. 2016. "The World According to Europe's Insurgent Parties: Putin, Migration and People Power." European Council on Foreign Relations: 1-6. https://ecfr.eu/archive/page/-/ECFR_181_-_THE_WORLD_ACCORDING_TO_EUROPE'S_INSURGENT_PARTIES_NEW.pdf.

⁶⁹ Krause, Annabelle. 2022. "The Russified German Far-Right." Harvard International Review. <https://hir.harvard.edu/the-russified-german-far-right/>.

⁷⁰ Aktürk, Şener. 2019. "Five Faces of Russia's Soft Power: Far Left, Far Right, Orthodox Christian, Russophone, and Ethnoreligious Networks – PONARS Eurasia." PONARS Eurasia. <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/five-faces-of-russia-s-soft-power-far-left-far-right-orthodox-christian-russophone-and-ethnoreligious-networks/>.

Church, as an upholding of their values.⁷¹ Sentiments such as this are designed to appeal to both Christian and right-leaning groups, so there is often an overlap between the target groups because of ideological alignments.

Russian information operations target Russian speakers and Russian ethnic groups, specifically in “near abroad” countries like Ukraine, Estonia, and Latvia, to gain a foothold in the countries where they live. This distinction is important as not all Russian speakers have a Russian ethnic background, and not all ethnic Russian individuals speak Russian. These two groups of individuals tend to have shared geopolitical beliefs and greater sympathies for Russia, meaning Russia can influence them to advocate for more pro-Russia policies. There is even a Russian governmental body, *Russotrudnichestvo*, designed to reach out to these groups.⁷²

Narrative Themes

Russian information operations take on a wide variety of forms, but the disinformation produced by Russia is the most visible and able to be cataloged. The US Department of State divides the large body of Russian disinformation into five distinct categories that spread specific messages for specific purposes.⁷³ The first category emphasizes the message that the United States and other Western countries are effectively bullying Russia and accusing them of being “Russophobic.” These messages focus on Russia playing the victim and crafting messages to win over the sympathies of individuals. The second major category contains disinformation about

⁷¹ Beardsworth, James. 2022. “Russia Vows to Defend 'Traditional Values' Against 'Gay Propaganda.'” *The Moscow Times*. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/11/09/russia-vows-to-defend-traditional-values-against-us-and-gay-propaganda-a79334>.

⁷² Aktürk, Şener. 2019. “Five Faces of Russia's Soft Power: Far Left, Far Right, Orthodox Christian, Russophone, and Ethnoreligious Networks – PONARS Eurasia.” *PONARS Eurasia*. <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/five-faces-of-russia-s-soft-power-far-left-far-right-orthodox-christian-russophone-and-ethnoreligious-networks/>.

⁷³ “Russia's Top Five Persistent Disinformation Narratives - United States Department of State.” 2022. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/russias-top-five-persistent-disinformation-narratives/>.

history and rewrites past outcomes into a more Russia-friendly lens. With these narratives, Russia takes a known historical event and either downplays its role or reworks it to overemphasize Russia as more benevolent or powerful than it was. Thirdly, another key message Russia has distributed is that Russian society is strong and stable, while Western society is doomed to fall soon to minimize its rivals' growth and power. The fourth major category of Russian disinformation focuses on the denial and repression of civil rights and equality movements and, overall, the suppression of "color revolutions." Russia typically sees these movements as threats or direct opposition to its traditional values and therefore does its best to stamp them out. According to the U.S. Department of State, the final group of Russian disinformation encompasses all the blatant falsehoods that Russia seeks to promote, aiming to stir up conflict and make itself look better. When spreading disinformation, Russia will modify a genuine news story or create a new piece of false information.⁷⁴

Conclusions

Russia uses information operations to maintain and grow its influence over other countries, keep its government in power, and to rival and question opposing powers. Russia uses information operations over other methods of securing and spreading influence because of their ability to reach a large audience with multiple conflicting narratives. Russian information operations backup and enforce military and economic initiatives because of the psychological element they entail, which can make the other campaigns easier to carry out. Information operations also provide Russia with legal justification to pair with its rhetoric to turn itself from

⁷⁴ "Russia's Top Five Persistent Disinformation Narratives - United States Department of State." 2022. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/russias-top-five-persistent-disinformation-narratives/>.

an invader into a liberator in the perception of those it targets. Information operations have evolved to embrace the Internet but still operate under Soviet principles and are still turned inward on Russian citizens to secure Russian government power. Russia is constantly running covert information operations on social and traditional news media, but it also targets periods of change or instability within societies to maximize operations' impact. The main criteria that determine the use of an information operation are that the target is an easily defined and reached group (political, religious, ethnic, or historical) and that any of Russia's typical narratives will reach that group and influence them in favor of Russia's goals. These types of narratives include sympathies for Russia's position, politically extreme arguments, and credible falsehoods.

China

Historically, Chinese information operations most often take the form of strict domestic censorship. However, entering the 21st century, Chinese information operations have evolved to a larger scale with previously unseen characteristics. Under Xi Jinping, Chinese information operations have evolved to adapt to the advent of the Internet and have brought Chinese information operations into the 21st century. With new technologies, China still prioritizes censorship in its information operations while increasing the amount of propaganda and disinformation it disseminates. These efforts align with the three warfares concept: legal, psychological, and media. Legal warfare provides China a basis to exert censorship and expand territories of control. Psychological warfare allows China to alter perceptions of itself to minimize controversy and capitalize on positive messaging. China utilizes media and public opinion warfare to distribute its psychological warfare narratives by saturating media spheres with disinformation. Finally, observed indicators and patterns from these warfares can help identify targets, goals, and themes of Chinese information operations.

Evolution of Information Operation Methodology

While historically being known for a deluge of propaganda and disinformation to its domestic populace, China also performs many information operations abroad. Upon his rise to power in 2012, Xi Jinping recognized the need to evolve Chinese information operations on both a domestic and international level and to modernize these operations to adapt to a digital landscape. While modern China has always strictly controlled its domestic information sphere,

under Xi Jinping, censorship and media control rose to all new heights.⁷⁵ Additionally, external information operations evolved as information gained new importance with the development of the Internet, allowing for new ways to influence and manipulate information spheres around the world.

Internal Information Operations

Information operations have long played a vital role in forming modern-day China. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) holds a firm grasp on China's domestic information sphere through its use of domestic information operations, which has allowed the Party to rewrite history. This control of the domestic information sphere is maintained through extensive use of state-sponsored media, censorship of external media sources, and party criticism. Suppression of external information sources and the resulting reliance by citizens on state-sponsored media gives the CCP complete control over the domestic Chinese information sphere.

One central tenet of the CCP's information operations is the complete and total control of domestic media sources. While under previous CCP leaders, media organizations enjoyed somewhat more freedom, starting in 2012 under Xi Jinping, state control over media tightened, and many freedoms that the press previously enjoyed were restricted.⁷⁶ Currently, China exerts control over its media sphere via a top-down approach, using many organizations dedicated to media control, most prominently the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPCPD). This organization goes by many names depending on its role and use, but it serves as a primary organ of media suppression and manipulation within

⁷⁵Diresta, Renee, Carly Miller, Vanessa Molter, John Pomfret, and Glenn Tiffert. 2020. "New White Paper on China's Full-Spectrum Information Operations." Stanford Cyber Policy Center. 7. <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/new-whitepaper-telling-chinas-story>.

⁷⁶ Kalathil, Shanthi. 2002. "Chinese Media and the Information Revolution." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2002/03/01/chinese-media-and-information-revolution-pub-924>.

China. Under Xi Jinping, the CPCPD was massively restructured to be responsible for the General Administration of Press and Publication and the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, greatly expanding its power.⁷⁷ It is currently responsible for monitoring media personnel; controlling the content of television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and film; and managing many of China's largest media organizations, such as Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily, and China Central Television. It dictates which stories should or should not be published and takes other such measures within China's internal domestic sphere. State-sponsored censorship also suppresses negative stories during special events, not allowing them to exceed a certain percentage on specific holidays and celebrations.⁷⁸ Using information operations to censor discussion of internal disasters is one such way that the CCP has exercised this control of the information sphere. It even uses this tactic to suppress discussions of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, which are highly censored even today, and information about that event is hard to come across in domestic circles, to the point that younger generations are unaware it even occurred.⁷⁹

Another way the Chinese government maintains censorship inside China is when private enterprises self-censor to avoid conflict with the CCP. This is most present in nontraditional media platforms such as WeChat and Tencent. Users of these platforms found that specific controversial key phrases could not be displayed or interacted with. Apart from an internal monopoly on domestic media, China controls information domestically by tightly controlling

⁷⁷ Thomson Reuters. 2023. "Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (CPCPD) (中共中央宣传部) | Practical Law." Practical Law. [https://uk.practicallaw.thomsonreuters.com/w-015-2153?transitionType=Default&contextData=\(sc.Default\)&firstPage=true](https://uk.practicallaw.thomsonreuters.com/w-015-2153?transitionType=Default&contextData=(sc.Default)&firstPage=true).

⁷⁸ Zimmerman, Nicholas, and Joshua Kurlantzick. 2017. "Media Censorship in China." Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/media-censorship-china#chapter-title-0-9>.

⁷⁹ Guo, Eileen. 2021. "China's Tiananmen anniversary crackdowns reach far beyond the firewall." MIT Technology Review. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/06/04/1025774/china-tiananmen-anniversary-protest-censorship/>.

external news sources. The CCP uses its monopoly to suppress discussion in foreign media sources of issues that would be damaging to itself. As a general rule, foreign media personnel must obtain permission to report on topics related to China; additionally, they are routinely harassed while carrying out their duties. One instance of China limiting external media sources is the CCP's banning the BBC from operating and broadcasting within China, likely due to the network's reporting of the Xinjiang Uyghur crisis.⁸⁰

Another vector of information control is the CCP's suppression of the Internet. Since adopting the Internet in 1994, the CCP has used the "Great Firewall of China" to control which websites are permitted or prohibited. In 1998, the adoption of the Great Firewall of China served as an integral part of the CCP's base power. Sites that provide alternative viewpoints from the CCP are restricted, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Google. By strictly controlling digital information sources, China can limit and hinder the discussion of undesirable topics and information. This lack of digital freedom and information forces the populace to either acquire a virtual private network (VPN), which is illegal in China, or to rely on the CCP and approved news sources.⁸¹ China further employs the so-called "50 Cent Army" to pollute the information sphere, encouraging private citizens to create hordes of social media accounts and bury specific topics in posts while supposedly paying commenters 50 cents per post.⁸²

⁸⁰ Wamsley, Laurel. 2021. "China Bans BBC World Service, Following U.K. Ban of Chinese Network." NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/11/966933445/china-bans-bbc-world-service-following-u-k-ban-of-chinese-network>; Zimmerman, Nicholas, and Joshua Kurlantzick. 2017. "Media Censorship in China." Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/media-censorship-china#chapter-title-0-9..>

⁸¹ Kurlantzick, Joshua. 2017. "Media Censorship in China." Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/media-censorship-china>.

⁸² King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Robert. 2017. How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument. 484. <https://gking.harvard.edu/50C>.

External Information Operation

In addition to the information operations that control the domestic information sphere, China maintains expansive information operations abroad. From official state-sponsored sources to more covert influences, the CCP casts a wide net of influence over international and other nations' domestic information spheres. Dozens of organizations within the CCP handle external information operations; chief among them is the United Front Works Department (UFWD). Externally focused information operations seem less focused on causing discord and more focused on controlling China's global perception as a first-world nation with a high standard of living and economic opportunity. This goal is often manifest in the CCP's suppression of coverage of contentious issues, such as the Uyghur genocide or poor standards of living, replacing them with positive stories, such as Chinese humanitarian aid and economic might.

According to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, the CCP's UFWD serves as a source of good press and representation for China to the external world. The CCP uses the UFWD to guide a vast network of civic and business associations, student groups, Chinese-language media, academic institutions, and politicians to intimidate, surveil, and co-opt the overseas Chinese diaspora community. The UFWD also works in conjunction with several other organizations and institutions, the two most notable being Confucius Institutes and Chinese Students and Scholars Association, to build relationships with academic figures. These figures then cater to Chinese narratives by manipulating academic environments to suppress dissent and agree with official Chinese stances on key issues. This is often done via the State covertly offering monetary bribes to foreign Chinese students to spy on dissident groups and direct threats toward them. Not only does this allow the CCP to establish spheres of influence abroad through sponsorship of businesses, but it also allows the CCP to control the representation of China as a

country of great academic and economic might.⁸³ Confucius Institutes' official purpose is to promote education of Chinese culture, but they are more often used to establish a presence and keep an eye on local population centers. By gaining a presence in a major population center, China can maintain a somewhat positive image of diplomacy while also keeping a pulse on CCP's image perception.⁸⁴

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves as an important starting point for Chinese information operations in many East Asian and African countries. Presented as a way to provide infrastructure in developing countries, the BRI allows China to exert financial and information control in a target nation.⁸⁵ This is due to the large amount of debt that China offers and these countries accept in order to fund large-scale infrastructure projects. Once accepted, China sends companies and citizens to work on these projects, allowing these entities to affect Chinese perception and establish a Chinese standard in these countries.⁸⁶ In addition to the influence gained by creating a Chinese standard through these projects, China uses BRI projects to create positive news coverage of itself and dispel accusations that it acts in bad faith. In 2019, China launched a *China Daily*-run Belt and Road News Network which runs content promoting the development and successes of BRI projects in 24 countries.⁸⁷

⁸³ "China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States | U.S.- CHINA | ECONOMIC and SECURITY REVIEW COMMISSION." 2018. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. 11-12 <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-overseas-united-front-work-background-and-implications-united-states>.

⁸⁴ Edwards, Lee, and Lee Edwards. 2021. "Confucius Institutes: China's Trojan Horse." The Heritage Foundation. <https://www.heritage.org/homeland-security/commentary/confucius-institutes-chinas-trojan-horse>, Kharas, Homi. 2021. "It's time for a new policy on Confucius institutes." Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/its-time-for-a-new-policy-on-confucius-institutes/>.

⁸⁵ Zimmerman, Nicholas, and Andrew Chatzky. n.d. "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

⁸⁶ Russel, Daniel, and Blake Berger. 2020. "Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative." Asia Society. 8. <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/weaponizing-belt-and-road-initiative>.

⁸⁷ Cook, Sarah. 2020. "Beijing's Global Megaphone." Freedom House. 10. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/beijings-global-megaphone>.

Modern Chinese Information Operations

Once information operations are selected to achieve a goal, China typically carries them out via a combination of the three warfares: legal, psychological, and media and public opinion.⁸⁸ Legal warfare encompasses China's effort to give a legal basis to its actions in national and international courts. China uses legal warfare to achieve censorship, silence dissenters, and expand its area of control. Psychological warfare has the goal of influencing, constraining, or altering an opponent's thoughts, emotions, and habits while at the same time strengthening friendly psychology towards China. The warfare is most apparent in the narratives China chooses to distribute and often includes the use of diplomatic pressure, propaganda, and disinformation. Finally, media or public opinion warfare refers to overt and covert media manipulation to influence perceptions and attitudes.⁸⁹ Media warfare is used to disrupt conversations, silence dissent, and disperse China-friendly narratives and is most performed via online methods.

Legal Warfare

Legal warfare is a tactic used primarily to silence disapproval for and justify actions taken to achieve Chinese national security goals, which would otherwise be against the norms of international customs. Modern examples of Chinese use of legal warfare can be seen through the lens of Hong Kong, the Xinjiang Uyghur Genocide, and the 2022 Winter Olympics. In these cases, China used legal warfare to silence dissent, enforce censorship, and expand its areas of

⁸⁸ Rolland, Nadège. 2020. "To Win without Fighting." Marine Corps University. 3-4 <https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/Expeditions-with-MCUP-digital-journal/To-Win-without-Fighting/>.

⁸⁹ Cheng, Dean. 2013. "Winning Without Fighting: The Chinese Psychological Warfare Challenge." The Heritage Foundation. https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/winning-without-fighting-the-chinese-psychological-warfare-challenge/#_ftn3.

control. In Hong Kong, China uses legal gray areas to silence and imprison protestors and critics. China weaponized similar legal warfare at the Winter 2022 Olympics when Chinese officials explicitly warned athletes to withhold any comments or discussions that would threaten Chinese laws or customs. Most blatant though, is China's claim of rights over the South China Sea via international legal courts.⁹⁰

The most blatant example of Chinese legal warfare is China's expansionist claim over the South China Sea. The South China Sea is an important economic and strategic corridor rich in natural resources; thus, control over the sea is highly coveted and widely disputed among littoral countries. China claims legal rights over the sea as an exclusive economic zone and, with this claim, assumes the ability to militarize islands and prevent free travel and navigation through the sea. China makes this claim through a historic Nine Dash Line, which it claimed in 1947 and encompasses much of the South China Sea. Since surrounding nations dispute the claim, it is unclear which country, if any, has full rights to the sea. A 2016 international tribunal ruled against the Chinese claim to the sea; however, China disregarded the ruling and continued operating as if it retains complete control. Before and since this decision, China engaged in island-building activity resulting in three new islands, which it then militarized.⁹¹ This legal warfare relies on claiming outposts as Chinese territory, thus allowing China to control the waters surrounding these outposts.⁹²

⁹⁰ "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea | Global Conflict Tracker." 2022. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>.

⁹¹ "China's Maritime Claims in the South China Sea - United States Department of State." 2022. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/briefings-foreign-press-centers/chinas-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea>.

⁹² "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea | Global Conflict Tracker." 2022. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>; Dahm, Michael. 2020. "Beyond "Conventional Wisdom": Evaluating the PLA's South China Sea Bases in Operational Context." War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/beyond-conventional-wisdom-evaluating-the-plas-south-china-sea-bases-in-operational-context/>.

Hong Kong has a complex history of legal and administrative rights, which creates gray areas in Hong Kong citizens' legal rights. In 2019, China passed a law that allows the extradition of Hong Kong persons to mainland China for trial.⁹³ The opaqueness of the Chinese legal system and the threat of being removed from local judicial proceedings caused Hong Kong residents to launch mass protests in 2019-2020.⁹⁴ With millions of protestors taking to the streets, China passed a National Security Law in June 2020 to quell the demonstrations. This National Security Law criminalized "separatism, subversion, terrorism, and foreign interference," which implied harsher responses to the protesters and critics in light of the Hong Kong protests.⁹⁵ Using this law, China has already removed politicians from office, arrested activists and journalists, and censored pro-democracy movements.⁹⁶

The Chinese government also used legal warfare during the 2022 Winter Olympics to enforce censorship. Chinese officials explicitly warned athletes to withhold any comments or discussions which would threaten Chinese laws or customs, such as discussions about Xinjiang Uyghur internment camps.⁹⁷ As a result, many athletes did withhold comments about Xinjiang and human rights abuses until their return to their home countries after the Games. China further exercised its legal "right" to control media coverage in an incident with a Dutch journalist in

⁹³ Roantree, Anne M., Delfina Wentzel, and Paul Tait. 2019. "Timeline: Key dates for Hong Kong extradition bill and protests." Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-extradition-timeline/timeline-key-dates-for-hong-kong-extradition-bill-and-protests-idUSKCN1TW14D>.

⁹⁴"China: Respect Rights of Hong Kong Protesters." 2019. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/03/china-respect-rights-hong-kong-protesters>.

⁹⁵ Feng, Emily. 2020. "5 Takeaways From China's Hong Kong National Security Law." NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/01/885900989/5-takeaways-from-chinas-hong-kong-national-security-law>;

Zimmerman, Nicholas, Lindsay Maizland, and James M. Lindsay. 2022. "Hong Kong's Freedoms: What China Promised and How It's Cracking Down." Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/background/hong-kong-freedoms-democracy-protests-china-crackdown>.

⁹⁶ Zimmerman, Nicholas, Lindsay Maizland, and James M. Lindsay. 2022. "Hong Kong's Freedoms: What China Promised and How It's Cracking Down." Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/background/hong-kong-freedoms-democracy-protests-china-crackdown>.

⁹⁷ Datt, Angeli. 2022. "#Beijing2022: Winter Olympics a display of propaganda and censorship." Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/article/beijing2022-winter-olympics-display-propaganda-and-censorship>.

which Chinese officials interrupted the journalist during a broadcast and relocated the journalist for an unknown reason during the games.⁹⁸

Psychological Warfare

Psychological warfare involves manipulating the decision-making of China's enemies while reinforcing a China-positive mindset among allies. This warfare is most apparent by observing the narratives that China disseminates to its targets and how they impact a target's perception of China. Chinese psychological warfare downplays human rights allegations and promotes images of China as a humanitarian nation full of economic bounty and opportunity. These objectives appear in the narratives China disseminates about the Xinjiang Uyghur Genocide, Hong Kong, COVID-19, Taiwan, and Chinese diaspora communities. China uses these narratives to shape enemies' and allies' perceptions of China to be the most advantageous to Chinese security objectives. In these cases, China most often attempts to deflect and misdirect blame while presenting itself as a rational actor forced to take action against foreign threats.

During the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, China disseminated three primary narratives in its attempt to quell the protests, as detailed by the Atlantic Council.⁹⁹ During the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, China disseminated three primary narratives in its attempt to quell the protests, as detailed by the Atlantic Council. The first narrative focused on the glorification of the police. Throughout the protests, the global community heavily criticized law enforcement in Hong Kong for using excessive force against demonstrators. This excessive use of force often

⁹⁸ "China: Censorship Mars Beijing Olympics." 2022. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/18/china-censorship-mars-beijing-olympics>; Datt, Angeli. 2022. "#Beijing2022; Winter Olympics a display of propaganda and censorship." Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/article/beijing2022-winter-olympics-display-propaganda-and-censorship>.

⁹⁹ Masat, Thom. 2020. "Targeting the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement." Atlantic Council. 10. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/dfirlab-china-reports/>.

led to Western media portraying a more sympathetic narrative of primarily peaceful protestors facing off against brutal and authoritarian law enforcement. To alter this perception, China instead disseminated narratives showcasing the supposed bravery and heroism of Hong Kong law enforcement. Another common narrative was that Western enemies (specifically the US) sponsored the protests in an attempt to instigate a “color revolution.” This color revolution was, as Dotson details, “intended to overthrow the Hong Kong city administration, to separate Hong Kong from the rest of China, and to weaken China as a whole.”¹⁰⁰ Using this narrative, China aimed to shift the portrayal of the protests as not an organic movement but instead as the work of a nefarious foreign actor. The third narrative China used was the dehumanization of the protestors, often attacking them directly and pushing messages that compared protestors to insects and other loathsome creatures. This was an attempt to dehumanize the demonstrators and present stamping them out as a good thing.¹⁰¹

The global reaction to the Xinjiang Uyghur Genocide represents a strong challenge to Chinese psychological warfare as it both injured Chinese global image and reminded the world of its historical failures of human rights. Brookings documented China’s strategy to alter the perception of the Xinjiang Internment Camps by redirecting conversations about Xinjiang as a whole or dispersing two primary narratives of the camps: that they were vital to Chinese national domestic security and a beneficial experience for Uyghur populations.¹⁰² The first of these

¹⁰⁰ Dotson, John. 2019. “Chinese Covert Social Media Propaganda and Disinformation Related to Hong Kong - Jamestown.” The Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/program/chinese-covert-social-media-propaganda-and-disinformation-related-to-hong-kong/>.

¹⁰¹ Dotson, John. 2019. “Chinese Covert Social Media Propaganda and Disinformation Related to Hong Kong - Jamestown.” The Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/program/chinese-covert-social-media-propaganda-and-disinformation-related-to-hong-kong/>; Masat, Thom. 2020. “Targeting the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement.” Atlantic Council. 15-17. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/dfrlab-china-reports/>.

¹⁰² Greitens, Sheena Chestnut, Myunghee Lee, and Emir Yazici. 2020. “Understanding China's 'preventive repression' in Xinjiang.” Brookings. <http://brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/04/understanding-chinas-preventive-repression-in-xinjiang/>; Wilson, Matthew. 2019. “Chinese Uyghurs: International Terrorists or a Terrorised Minority? - AIIA.” Australian Institute of International Affairs. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/chinese-uyghurs-international-terrorists-or-terrorised->

narratives redirects the perception of internment camps to voluntary vocational training centers where unskilled Uyghur people could learn new skills to prosper. When China is forced to address the harsh realities of reeducation camps, China frames it as a national security issue and claims fears of Islamic terrorism from East Turkistan extremists. This reframing appears somewhat successful, as many Muslim and Middle Eastern countries expressed approval of these internment camps. However, many Western countries continue to protest and boycott products made in Xinjiang. Another way China distracted from the truth was through the dissemination of messages aimed at highlighting Xinjiang's cotton and scenic sites¹⁰³

Given the two countries' shared history, Taiwan presents a unique optics challenge for China. Despite Taiwan's claims to independence, China has used various tactics and tools to exert pressure on the island to force reunification. China uses its propaganda narratives to present a reunification with China as both an inevitability and a good opportunity for the Taiwanese people while also downplaying threats of aggression.¹⁰⁴ China employs disinformation and propaganda to demoralize Taiwan's citizens and present the idea of reunification as both an inevitability and a good opportunity for the Taiwanese people. These narratives are dispersed primarily through the UFWD as China-sponsored trips to China for various local authority

minority/; Cafiero, Giorgio. 2019. "Arab Gulf states silent on China's Xinjiang crackdown." Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/arab-gulf-states-silent-chinas-xinjiang-crackdown>.

¹⁰³ Greitens, Sheena Chestnut, Myunghye Lee, and Emir Yazici. 2020. "Understanding China's 'preventive repression' in Xinjiang." Brookings. <http://brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/04/understanding-chinas-preventive-repression-in-xinjiang/>; Wilson, Matthew. 2019. "Chinese Uyghurs: International Terrorists or a Terrorised Minority? - AIIA." Australian Institute of International Affairs. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/chinese-uyghurs-international-terrorists-or-terrorised-minority/>; Cafiero, Giorgio. 2019. "Arab Gulf states silent on China's Xinjiang crackdown." Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/arab-gulf-states-silent-chinas-xinjiang-crackdown>.

¹⁰⁴ "Chinese Messaging Across the Strait." 2020. Atlantic Council. 5-7. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/dfrlab-china-reports/>; Blanchette, Jude, Scott Kennedy, Scott Livingston, and Bonnie S. Glaser. 2021. "Protecting Democracy in an Age of Disinformation: Lessons from Taiwan." CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/protecting-democracy-age-disinformation-lessons-taiwan>; Heath, Timothy. 2018. "Beijing's Influence Operations Target Chinese Diaspora." War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/beijings-influence-operations-target-chinese-diaspora/>.

figures, such as politicians, journalists, and business leaders, to showcase the economic benefits of reunifying with China.¹⁰⁵ China extensively employs disinformation to weaken societal trust in the Taiwanese government and allies' commitment to the country. Many of these disinformation narratives questioned Taiwan's leadership, such as the ones documented by Harvard University's Belfer Center, which involved casting doubt on President Tsai Ing-Wen's doctoral degree, rehashing contentious domestic issues such as same-sex marriage, attacking the government's foreign interference bill, creating doubts around Taiwan's election integrity, and accusing the Taiwanese government of banning cultural practices. This last rumor enjoyed some success as 10,000 Taiwanese took to the streets in protest of this perceived banning of tradition.¹⁰⁶ China also exerts economic influence to prevent many foreign countries and officials from recognizing Taiwan as a nation, aimed at weakening Taiwanese people's faith in ally nations.¹⁰⁷ An example of influence is when American actor John Cena referred to Taiwan as a country, to which China responded by threatening to pull his upcoming *Fast and Furious* movie from being released in Chinese markets..¹⁰⁸

Individuals with shared histories, backgrounds, and cultures with China are a prime target for China's psychological warfare as they hold a pre-existing connection to China. Chinese diaspora communities include people who were born in China or who otherwise identify as

¹⁰⁵Robertson, Iain. 2020. "China's Disinformation Strategy." Atlantic Council. 5. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/dfrlab-china-reports/>.

¹⁰⁶ Huang, Aaron. 2020. "Combatting and Defeating Chinese Propaganda and Disinformation." Belfer Center. 13-16 <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/combating-and-defeating-chinese-propaganda-and-disinformation-case-study-taiwans-2020>; Zimmerman, Nicholas, and Joshua Kurlantzick. 2023. "Beijing's Influence Tactics with the Chinese Diaspora: An Excerpt." Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/beijings-influence-tactics-chinese-diaspora-excerpt>; Harold, Scott W., Nathan Beauchamp, and Jeffrey W. Hornung. 2021. "Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media | RAND." RAND Corporation. 106. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z3.html.

¹⁰⁷ Zimmerman, Nicholas, and Lindsay Maizland. 2022. "Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense." Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-taiwan-relations-tension-us-policy-biden>.

¹⁰⁸ "John Cena: Fast and Furious star sorry over Taiwan remark backlash." 2021. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57241053>.

Chinese based on the language they speak or their ancestry.¹⁰⁹With a large number of Chinese diaspora communities around the world, estimated to total 45 million people, China can influence large communities in foreign countries. Similar to narratives targeting Taiwan, these soft power techniques often reinforce China's image as a well-developed nation while questioning the host country's politics and its ability to govern.¹¹⁰ Other examples of attempting to befriend the Chinese diaspora are Chinese "Wolf Warrior" diplomats who attack the perceived mistreatment of these communities.¹¹¹ Another example is in the deliberate language in Xi Jinping's speeches, which frames attacks on China as an attack on all Chinese people everywhere in an attempt to unite Chinese diaspora communities to CCP's causes. A final way China targets its diaspora is via sponsoring "birthright" trips in which the state sponsors two-week trips to ethnic Chinese youth to their province of origin. China presents these trips as opportunities for these youth to reconnect with their heritage. However, the trips also allow Chinese-ethnic youth to form a favorable opinion of China as China presents itself as a country that is not plagued with human right abuses..¹¹²

COVID-19 catalyzed China taking information operations to a new level internationally. As the virus spread and death tolls rose, many blamed and criticized China's handling of the initial outbreak. China downplayed news relating to anything from the initial outbreak to harsh quarantine methods, as these narratives went directly against China's desired self-image, which depicted China as a modern first-world country. To counteract these narratives, CEPA and

¹⁰⁹ Goodkind, Daniel. 2019. "The Chinese Diaspora: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Trends." U.S. Census Bureau. 2. <https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2019/demo/chinese-diaspora.html>.

¹¹⁰ "Descendants of the Dragon." 2020. Atlantic Council. 10. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/dfrlab-china-reports/>.

¹¹¹ Brandt, Jessica, and Bret Schafer. 2020. "How China's 'wolf warrior' diplomats use and abuse Twitter." Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/how-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomats-use-and-abuse-twitter/>.

¹¹² Heath, Timothy. 2018. "Beijing's Influence Operations Target Chinese Diaspora." War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/beijings-influence-operations-target-chinese-diaspora/>.

RAND document that China instead pushed disinformation narratives that disputed the virus's origins, highlighted the failures of the US response, and promoted itself as a global leader. During the pandemic, China pushed disinformation and propaganda to achieve its information operation goals of maintaining a clean public image. This push included downplaying and promoting conspiracy theories of COVID-19 origins in the nation and emphasizing China's humanitarian efforts abroad to rehabilitate China's global image.¹¹³

Media Warfare

Public opinion and media warfare refers to the actual manipulation of media environments to influence the information sphere in target countries or simply the form in which China inserts its narrative into these media spheres. China primarily conducts media warfare through digital means such as content farms, bot armies, page flooding, and hashtag hijacking. Examples of these tactics can be seen in cases such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and COVID-19 events, as China exerted great efforts to control the media environment of these issues. China also attempts to manipulate traditional media environments, though it most often manipulates these environments in conjunction with economic moves, such as in regions where Belt and Road Investments are common.

¹¹³Brandt, Jessica, and Bret Schafer. 2020. "Five Things to Know About Beijing's Disinformation Approach." Alliance For Securing Democracy. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/five-things-to-know-about-beijings-disinformation-approach/>; Dubow, Ben, Edward Lucas, and Jake Morris. 2021. "Jabbed in the Back: Mapping Russian and Chinese Information Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic." CEPA. <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/jabbed-in-the-back-mapping-russian-and-chinese-information-operations-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>; Matthews, Miriam, Katya Migacheva, and Andrew Brown. 2021. "Russia and China: Superspreaders of Malign and Subversive Information on COVID-19." RAND Corporation. 23. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA112-11.html; Zimmerman, Nicholas, and Joshua Kurlantzick. 2020. "How China Ramped Up Disinformation Efforts During the Pandemic." Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-china-ramped-disinformation-efforts-during-pandemic>.

When considering traditional media, China makes great effort to influence the global media information sphere. As found in a 2022 Freedom House report, in the last decade, China sharply increased its China-sponsored content in international media, its use of coercive tactics against international media companies, and its covert activities on social media platforms. When attempting to influence other nations' media environments, China relies heavily on diplomats who write opinion pieces for local media while also taking out ads, providing free content, and co-producing content in these local media venues.¹¹⁴ China uses coercive tactics to influence information spheres by harassing news agencies and journalists who take stances with which China disagrees. These harassment campaigns often take the form of cyberbullying campaigns, legal threats, and threats of economic repercussions.

Regarding covert activity on social media platforms, the biggest Chinese state-owned media companies, such as People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, China Global Television Network, and China Daily, all have accounts on various global social media platforms. These accounts are run in English and promote themselves on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, all of which are banned in domestic China, making it almost certain that they target foreign audiences exclusively. Accounts on these platforms do not reveal their connection to the CCP, often choosing to brand themselves as organic privately-owned media companies within China. From these accounts, stories and paid ads highlight the wonders of Chinese technology and culture while sprinkling in narratives that serve Chinese goals. An example of this tactic was during the 2020 Hong Kong protests, during which multiple stories ran on China Global Television Network that attacked and maligned Hong Kong protestors.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Cook, Sarah. 2020. "Beijing's Global Megaphone:." Freedom House. 6-12
<https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/beijings-global-megaphone>.

¹¹⁵ Cook, Sarah. 2022. "Beijing's Global Media Influence Report 2022." Freedom House. 6.
<https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/beijings-global-megaphone>.

In Taiwan, Chinese public opinion and media warfare took place primarily through social media manipulation, most blatantly with Taiwan's 2018 local mayoral and 2020 presidential elections. During these elections, China attempted to interfere in the media sphere to hinder Tsai Ing-Wen's and the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) election chances and boost China-friendly mayoral candidate Han Kuo-yu from the Nationalist Party of China (KMT). China did this through content farms, networks of fake accounts, and page flooding. Using sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Weibo, China-owned accounts on these platforms ran content farms that dispersed psychological warfare narratives. To carry out these attacks, China first analyzes which social media platform best suits its objective, gathers information and gains the trust of the users, and then disseminates the chosen narrative aimed at undermining the target. In the 2018 mayoral election, nearly 250 fake accounts ran a network in support of the populist mayoral candidate, Han Kuo-yu, who ran on a China-friendly platform. In the 2020 elections, the Atlantic Council found that two content farms termed Mission and Roar, shared content that had significant reach in Han Kuo-yu circles, even becoming one of the most shared websites among Taiwanese Facebook Users.¹¹⁶ In September 2020, the Atlantic Council found further evidence of Chinese media warfare on CCP-linked Facebook pages, which propagated election disinformation to an audience of 750,000 followers.¹¹⁷ These content farms pushed content that was then amplified by an army of China-manufactured false social media accounts. Using false social media accounts, China covertly recirculates and generates buzz around useful narratives.

¹¹⁶ Harold, Scott W., Nathan Beauchamp, and Jeffrey W. Hornung. 2021. "Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media | RAND." RAND Corporation. 65-73 https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z3.html; "Chinese Messaging Across the Strait." 2020. Atlantic Council. 10-13 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/dfrlab-china-reports/>.

¹¹⁷ "Chinese Messaging Across the Strait." 2020. Atlantic Council. 12 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/dfrlab-china-reports/>.

Responding to the global response to China's genocide of the Xinjiang Uyghur population, China used social media, most notably Twitter, to hijack conversation threads and pollute the information sphere. This involved creating and hijacking many accounts to achieve a perception of a broader support base than exists in reality. China employed this tactic by hijacking a wide array of accounts for this purpose. Many Twitter accounts started espousing the wonders of Xinjiang, both for its culture and its economic effects, such as its cotton. Chinese government-linked actors hijacked several high-profile accounts, likely in an attempt to drown any other use of the hashtag Xinjiang, which individuals worldwide had been using to discuss China's human rights violations. Chinese trolls likely created many bot accounts to amplify the hijacked accounts and dilute the hashtag with various short messages about Xinjiang. These accounts were relatively overt in their operations as they had many characteristics of fake accounts and did not stand up to scrutiny. The overall goal of these accounts was to pollute the information sphere on Twitter by drowning out the Xinjiang hashtag.¹¹⁸

Media warfare targeting Chinese diaspora communities is somewhat overt since Chinese messages on various social media platforms could only be aimed at them since the platforms are banned in China. China targets overt messages at Chinese diaspora communities most frequently on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook while conducting more covert messaging on WeChat. Within an insular community such as WeChat, a primarily Chinese-based social media platform, information regarding the 2020 U.S. presidential elections was neutral to Biden but was markedly anti-Trump. On Facebook, a content farm based in Malaysia, termed "Qiqu Web" and "Qiqi," pushed pro-China and anti-Trump messages. These pages accumulated 1.5 million

¹¹⁸ Warren, Patrick. 2021. "Understanding the Pro-China Propaganda and Disinformation Tool Set in Xinjiang." Lawfare Blog. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/understanding-pro-china-propaganda-and-disinformation-tool-set-xinjiang>.

followers, though they received very low engagement numbers.¹¹⁹ This result represents much of China's attempts at operating information operations abroad in diaspora communities.¹²⁰

Criteria of Chinese Information Operations

Several trends concerning the goals, targets, and narrative themes become apparent when evaluating Chinese information operations. China's primary goal in information operations is seen clearly from its use of the three warfares: to silence dissent and controversy and to maintain an image as a first-world country. Regarding targets, China primarily uses information operations on targets closer to the mainland and relies on other means to exert influence for targets farther abroad. The narrative themes of its information operations positively focus on China's humanitarian efforts and silence other controversial topics.

Goals of Modern Chinese Information Operations

Chinese information operations most often serve to maintain CCP power and preserve a global image as a developed and influential nation that can offer economic benefits to nations cooperating with it. As such, the CCP's goal with its information operations seems to be to accomplish what China cannot otherwise achieve through more traditional methods, such as by exerting economic, political, or other such pressure. China targets its ethnic diaspora and focuses on pushing a positive global image to anyone willing to buy it. However, due to a lack of finesse in Chinese information operations, many of these attempts seem heavy-handed and ineffective.

¹¹⁹ "Descendants of the Dragon." 2020. Atlantic Council. 10. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/dfrlab-china-reports/>.

¹²⁰ Brandt, Jessica, and Bret Schafer. 2020. "How China's 'wolf warrior' diplomats use and abuse Twitter." Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/how-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomats-use-and-abuse-twitter/>; Harold, Scott W., Nathan Beauchamp, and Jeffrey W. Hornung. 2021. 115-124. "Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media | RAND." RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z3.html.

Thus, it is unlikely China's goal is to change minds but to reinforce already-held beliefs about China. Furthermore, another aim of Chinese information operations is to lower the trust and social cohesion overall in the target country.¹²¹

Targeted Groups

China most often targets East Asian countries with the idea that it is easier to influence near targets than those further abroad. Consequently, Taiwan is a testing ground for many of China's information operations tactics.¹²² Though it is common in Western politics to claim Chinese interference, China more often interferes in East Asian countries than in Western ones. China does not specifically target populations whose minds it could change, but rather targets populations that already have a starting positive opinion of, or connections to, China, as seen with attempts to influence Chinese diaspora communities.¹²³ However, the success of this targeting is variable, depending on the target's natural defenses or strength of response.¹²⁴

Externally, China seemingly targets non-Western nations the heaviest with its information operations, such as Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and African countries.¹²⁵ Within its domestic information sphere, China most frequently targets dissidents and critics of the CCP.

¹²¹ Harold, Scott W., Nathan Beauchamp, and Jeffrey W. Hornung. 2021. 11-17. "Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media | RAND." RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z3.html; "Chinese Messaging Across the Strait." 2020. Atlantic Council. 25. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/dfirlab-china-reports/>.

¹²² Harold, Scott W., Nathan Beauchamp, and Jeffrey W. Hornung. 2021. "Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media | RAND." RAND Corporation. 113. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z3.html.

¹²³ Atlantic Council. 2020. "Descendants of the Dragon." Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/dfirlab-china-reports/>

¹²⁴ Kharas, Homi. 2021. "It's time for a new policy on Confucius institutes." Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/its-time-for-a-new-policy-on-confucius-institutes/>; Edwards, Lee, and Lee Edwards. 2021. "Confucius Institutes: China's Trojan Horse." The Heritage Foundation. <https://www.heritage.org/homeland-security/commentary/confucius-institutes-chinas-trojan-horse>; Harold, Scott W., Nathan Beauchamp, and Jeffrey W. Hornung. 2021. "Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media | RAND." RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z3.html.

¹²⁵ Harold, Scott W., Nathan Beauchamp, and Jeffrey W. Hornung. 2021. "Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media | RAND." RAND Corporation. 77. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z3.html.

This specifically has been seen in the application of legal warfare to silence Hong Kong protestors. China similarly silences its critics with its handling of the BBC reporting on the Xinjiang Uyghur genocide and threats of legal prosecution in the 2022 Winter Olympics.¹²⁶ Within a nation China is attempting to influence, China targets local economic and political leaders to build support. Failing that, China then attempts to remove these people from the environment, as seen in the Hong Kong and Taiwan cases.

Narrative Themes

Narrative themes are difficult to generalize on as China tailors its approach to each target and lacks a uniform narrative methodology to information narratives. Overall, China pushes the narrative of being a great nation that merely wishes to share its greatness with the world. Within this tactic, when facing criticism for human rights violations, China downplays accusations and instead attempts to redirect focus to Chinese humanitarian efforts internationally and feel-good stories domestically, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²⁷ When attempting to combat internal dissent, China often claims foreign interference in its internal affairs, as in Hong Kong, blaming the protests on Western interference. When dealing with international information operations, China attempts to influence nations through economic appeal, a common selling point of Chinese relations. From Taiwan to African and East Asian countries, economic prosperity is one of the major themes of Chinese information operations.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Tiezzi, Shannon, and Catherine Putz. 2021. "China Bans BBC World News Over Xinjiang Reporting." *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/china-bans-bbc-world-news-over-xinjiang-reporting/>.

¹²⁷ Dubow, Ben, Edward Lucas, and Jake Morris. 2021. "Jabbed in the Back: Mapping Russian and Chinese Information Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic." CEPA. <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/jabbed-in-the-back-mapping-russian-and-chinese-information-operations-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

¹²⁸ Russel, Daniel, and Blake Berger. 2020. "Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative." *Asia Society*. <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/weaponizing-belt-and-road-initiative>; "Chinese Messaging Across the Strait." 2020. *Atlantic Council*. 22. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/dfrlab-china-reports/>.

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be observed from the evolution, form, and function of Chinese information operations. From the evolution, China has been pushed primarily by Xi Jinping, who recognized the importance of digital media, into adapting its censorship operations for a digital world. From the form of modern Chinese information operations, we can see that China attacks targets with information operations through a combined use of legal, psychological, and media warfare. Legal warfare provides China a basis to exert censorship and expand territories of control. Psychological warfare allows China to alter perceptions of itself to minimize controversy and capitalize on positive messaging. China uses media warfare to disrupt conversations, silence dissent, and disseminate China-friendly narratives. Finally, when evaluating the criteria these warfares utilize, China primarily attempts to decrease criticism and dissent and increase positive influence. It does this by targeting those with a pre-existing connection to China to push narratives of China being a great developed nation.

Comparing Russia and China

China and Russia use information operations in similar ways, but often to accomplish different goals. This difference in goals is due to their history, global position, and overall national security objectives. When considering the evolution of Russian and Chinese information operations, they first learned to use censorship to control domestic information spheres, and then evolved these techniques to disrupt international information spheres. Their use of information operations, as viewed through the lenses of the three warfares, also contain similarities in how they disseminate these operations; they differ depending on the goals. Russia uses legal warfare to back military action, while China uses it to silence dissent. Russia utilizes psychological warfare against Western nations, while China tries to boost its reputation. Russia deploys media and public opinion warfare to overwhelm an information sphere while China tries to infiltrate it. When considering the goals, target groups, and narrative themes of these countries' information operations, it is clear that although they both seek to influence the international information sphere, they do so with different criteria. Russia attempts to use information operations to support physical efforts, while China prefers using information operations to avoid using on-the-ground military action.

Comparing the Evolution of Russian and Chinese Information Operations

Russian and Chinese information operations evolved around similar goals; however, they differed in the form they took. Both nations' internal information operations are based heavily on censorship, particularly that of suppressing internal dissent of the ruling regime. Entering the 21st Century, Russia and China recognized the power and danger of the Internet to their ruling

regime, so much of their modern information operations tactics focused on adapting to the Internet and the greater access to information it provided. Though Russia and China often use similar tools, they differ in their application. The difference in Russian and Chinese goals and history guided the evolution of their information operations. Russia, having experience dating back to the Soviet Union, relies on tried-and-true tactics of “active measures,” now referred to as “measures of support,” and primarily uses information operations to back up military maneuvers and sow discord. Russia’s external information operations evolved after they were initially ineffective in supporting physical activity in 2008, and they became more impactful in 2014 in Ukraine and into today. Russia also enlists the aid of mercenaries, like the Wagner Group, to supplement its physical action and disinformation efforts, and then utilizes information operations to downplay the partnership. China, however, being a relatively new player to the global stage, relies more on diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties to operate. As such, many information operations aim to maintain China’s global image as an economic powerhouse. This also leads to China being more discerning in its choice of when and how to use information operations today.

Comparing the Use of the Three Warfares in Russian and Chinese Information Operations

China and Russia both utilize legal warfare in conjunction with their information operations related to territorial claims. With the South China Sea, China uses established laws relating to exclusive economic zones and manipulates them to expand its area of control around its artificial islands. Russia uses laws related to independence and historical territory claims when it attempts to annex areas such as Crimea. While they are using different laws and different

circumstances, the same goals of territorial control and expansion are the rationale for their use of legal warfare. China and Russia differ, however, in other uses of legal warfare. China uses legal warfare to control what is being said inside and outside of China about the country. China threatens foreigners, like Olympic athletes, with legal prosecution in order to censor bad perspectives of it.

China and Russia differ in their use of psychological warfare because they have different goals they want to achieve, although they often attack similar targets to achieve them. With China, the primary goal of psychological warfare is to maintain a non-controversial global image as an economic powerhouse, whereas Russia wishes to maintain a reputation as an essential global power. As such much of Russian psychological warfare is aimed at weakening other nations' societies through both predictable events, like elections, and unpredictable events, like a pandemic, while also criticizing democracy as a whole, calling it an ineffective system of government. China, on the other hand, focuses much of its psychological warfare on silencing human rights violations allegations and redirecting attention to its humanitarian and economic activity. Where both of these nations overlap is through their criticism of the West. Both Chinese and Russian psychological warfare seeks to damage faith in democratic processes and institutions. One key way they do so is through targeting elections. In China's case, it targeted Taiwanese elections to damage the Taiwanese people's faith in their election operations while also attempting to aid China-friendly politicians. Russia has a similar approach, attacking the US presidential elections; however, that effort was more focused on egging on political tension to distract from its other operations.

Russia and China have a lot of overlap in their use of and skills in media warfare. The major difference between their use of media warfare is the volume of dissemination. While

spreading its information operations, Russia tends to use a more all-encompassing approach, which is nicknamed the “firehose method.” This tactic seeks to overwhelm the information sphere by using as many avenues to spread as much information as possible. China is more meticulous with its spread of information by picking and choosing which avenues to use based on what it thinks would be best applicable for a specific task or reaching a particular audience. Both countries use social media heavily because of its growing prominence in the world and easy accessibility, as opposed to relying more on traditional media, though both also still use traditional media. The methods used to undertake information operations also overlap, such as creating fake accounts and taking over the accounts of real individuals. Overall, Russia and China conduct media warfare operations similarly but differ in the fact that China aims to reach a specific target while Russia aims at the totality of the information sphere.

Comparing the Function of Russian and Chinese Information Operations

The goals of Chinese and Russian information operations differ greatly based on their history, available resources, and global political position. This difference in positioning guides what these countries are fighting for and what they wish to achieve with their information operations. Russia's goals are aimed at expanding and maintaining its influence while weakening other major powers. Russia treats global influence as a zero-sum game, acting like it has more power, then Western countries have less power, and vice versa. Due to this view, Russia performs more military actions against other nations and uses information operations to back these military maneuvers as a way to demonstrate Russian strength. In China's case, its information operations are primarily aimed at maintaining its reputation as a strong, humanitarian, economic powerhouse. China wishes to be a global leader, and so its information

operations are focused on expanding Chinese influence and maintaining a clean reputation. Human rights allegations tarnish this image and sabotage its goal, so much of Chinese information operations is aimed at silencing these conversations.

Both Russia and China have specific targets in mind when utilizing information operations. One of the biggest commonalities in these targets is in groups that share a background with the country. For China, that is the Chinese diaspora communities, and for Russia, that is Russian ethnic groups in the “near abroad.” These groups are targeted because of their shared backgrounds, language, and values, and due to their shared heritage, these groups are more vulnerable to these information operations. Where Russia and China differ is with other groups targeted in their information operations. China targets dissidents and critics of the CCP in order to suppress their opinions, as well as targeting its neighboring countries so they have a more positive view of China and are more willing to cooperate economically. Russia targets both extreme ends of the political spectrum in order to emphasize divisions in society, as well as targeting religious groups who may also share values with Russia.

Chinese and Russian information operations portray significantly differing narratives. One of China's main objectives in its information operations is to silence dissent and prevent its spread through the use of pressure and censorship. China seeks to portray itself as a great and highly developed nation with significant and remarkable economic power. In an effort to suppress its known human rights issues, China disseminates narratives showcasing its humanitarian efforts and focusing on its positive image. Russia is overall less focused on spreading positive images than China is. One of Russia's main narrative themes is about the weaknesses of Western democratic societies and how they are corrupt and doomed to fall. In the same vein, Russia also plays the victim and tries to portray that all of the other major powers are

out to get it. Some of the other themes of Russian information operations are history-related disinformation, where historical facts are altered, emphasized, or downplayed, and made-up stories made to make either Russia seem stronger, or a Western country look weaker.

Conclusions

Table 1: A Direct Comparison of Russian and Chinese Information Operations

	Russia	Both	China
Evolution of Information Operations	Uses past failures to guide information operation development; Primarily a military state which relies on military effort	Internal Censorship	Information operation development dependent on current figure head; Able to rely on other influence methods, can exert strong economic pressure
Legal Warfare	Justify physical action	Territory expansion	External censorship
Psychological Warfare	Expand divisions in society during periods of change	Criticizing the West and democracy	Hide humanitarian crises; Highlight its economic abilities; Maintain a positive reputation
Media Warfare	Overwhelm the Information Sphere; Use both traditional and social media	Specific mechanisms of disinformation spread on social media	Deliberate in targets and dissemination; Covertly insert narratives in media
Goals	Weakening the power of its adversaries	Maintain and expand global power and influence	Protect and maintain reputation
Targets	Left-leaning Groups; Right-leaning Groups; Religious Christian Groups	Diaspora communities; Ethnic groups; Language speakers	Dissents and critics; Neighboring countries
Narrative Themes	Weakness of Western democracies; Self-victimization; Historical revisions; Falsehoods		Promote economic status and humanitarian efforts; Suppress dissent

Chinese and Russian information operations share many similarities in the tools, methods, and goals of these operations. Where they differ is in the specific goals that guide these

operations, as both nations have different resources, histories, and values. Though both countries' information operations are rooted in censorship, the different goals of these nations forced their operations to evolve in different directions. Russian information operations are aimed at expanding Russia's power to support on-the-ground military actions. This results in Russian information operations being designed to be overwhelming and disruptive of the information sphere. Chinese information operations are guided at launching the nation as the preeminent global superpower based on its economic capabilities. As a result, Chinese information operations are often more subtle, focused, and aimed at maintaining a clean global reputation.

Outlook

When evaluating Russian and Chinese use of information operations, it is clear that Russia and China use information operations due to its ability to both support and stand in place of physical action. Russia supports physical military maneuvers with information operations, while China utilizes information operations so that it does not need to deploy physical resources. The two nations' available resources and previous experience in information operations guided the evolution of these two nations' information operations. Modern Russian operations learn from past operations' failures, while Chinese information operations evolved with the will of new leaders and economic developments. The two nations use similar tools to conduct information operations, using legal structures and bodies, psychological narratives to attack societal weak points, and media, particularly social media, to hijack international information spheres. From these tactics, it can be seen that Russian information operations are designed to be overwhelming and disruptive to the information sphere. In contrast, Chinese information operations are often more subtle, focused, and aimed at maintaining a clean global reputation.

Russian information operations in the future will likely be seen in two main circumstances. Russia utilizes both planned and unexpected periods of change, so Russia will likely continue to use this influence tactic during elections and times of turmoil. Furthermore, Russian information operations will likely continue supporting the country's physical efforts, mainly seen in action today in Ukraine and the "near abroad." Chinese information operations will likely continue to be seen in neighboring countries and in situations where it can boost its global image. China will likely accompany these operations with other influence methods, such as diplomatic or economic pressure.

Regarding the use of the Chinese Three Warfares model in this study, the model proved to be an effective tool for directly comparing Russia and China's information operations from a United States national security perspective. In future studies, this model would be useful for comparing emerging actors' use of information operations. The actors studied next should be North Korea and Iran, as the Office of the Director of National Intelligence's (ODNI's) United States 2023 Annual Threat Assessment designates these countries to be growing threats to the national security of the United States.¹²⁹ It would likely be valuable to examine the scope of North Korean and Iranian information operations and to understand if they use them and how they compare to Russian and Chinese operations.

¹²⁹ “Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community.” 2023. DNI.gov.
<https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2023-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

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