



A woman walks past a television in New Taipei City 2 January 2019 that shows China's President Xi Jinping making a speech commemorating the fortieth anniversary of a message sent to Taiwan in 1979 that asserted Taiwan's unification with the mainland is "inevitable." Xi warned against any efforts to promote the island's independence, saying China would not renounce the option of using military force to annex it. Xi continued, "After peaceful reunification, Taiwan will have lasting peace and the people will enjoy good and prosperous lives. With the great motherland's support, Taiwan compatriots' welfare will be even better, their development space will be even greater." (Photo by Sam Yeh, Agence France-Presse)

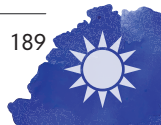
How to Counter China's Disinformation Campaign in Taiwan

Linda Zhang



China wants to shift Taiwan's public opinion to adopt a pro-unification stance. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has held

the goal of unifying with Taiwan since the Chinese Civil War of 1945–1949, and Beijing's toolkit has expanded since the days of Mao Tse-tung's periodic



initiation of cross-strait artillery fire. Today, Taiwan experiences near-constant threats from China, including those to its media and social media landscape. Taiwan receives the most foreign government disseminated disinformation out of all the countries in the world.¹ The risk of conventional war is real, but Taiwan's more urgent threat comes from China's attacks on its media independence and distribution of disinformation targeting Taiwanese elections.

Definition and Objective

For the purposes of this article, we will use *Science Magazine's* definition of disinformation as "false information that is purposefully spread to deceive people."² This definition, incidentally, is popular among PRC netizens and scholars and is helpful for understanding the PRC's disinformation campaign in Taiwan.³ The objective of Chinese disinformation in Taiwan is to convince Taiwan's people that unification with China is their best (and only) option. This takes form in terms of economics, where the Chinese argue that Taiwan would be better off financially under unification; foreign relations, where China claims that the Taiwanese government cannot offer adequate diplomatic services and protection to its citizens; and culture, where China spreads disinformation about eligibility for the Olympics if athletes competed

Linda Zhang is a research associate at the American Enterprise Institute studying Chinese economics, political economy, and security. She was a Liu Xiaobo Fellow with the Congressional Executive Commission on China and special assistant at the U.S.-China Strong Foundation. She holds an MA in strategic studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, a certificate in Chinese studies from the Hopkins-Nanjing Center, and a BA in international relations and economics from Boston University.

under "Taiwan" rather than "Chinese Taipei."⁴ The PRC also uses disinformation to discredit individuals who, in the PRC's perception, threaten its agenda. The targets of these disinformation campaigns range from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen to diplomatic allies, celebrities, journalists, and prominent supporters of Taiwan's independence.⁵

China's Toolkit

Early PRC cross-strait propaganda methods included using megaphones

to broadcast announcements and playing music to encourage defections in the 1950s.⁶ Technology and tactics have advanced significantly since then, and the PRC started what it calls "information warfare" (信息化战争) against Taiwan in the early 2000s. The PRC encouraged sympathetic Taiwanese businessmen to purchase media outlets, bought advertising in Taiwan's media to influence public opinion, and pressured media proprietors who had investments in China to stop publishing criticism of the PRC.⁷

Due to its financial resources, the PRC has made significant progress in infiltrating Taiwanese television and print media, even though Chinese entities cannot directly own Taiwanese media companies without government approval.⁸ In 2008, pro-Beijing businessman Tsai Eng-meng, the owner of snack food company Want Want, purchased China Times Group, a media company that owns one newspaper and two TV channels.⁹ Since the purchase, reporting from *The China Times* took on a tone less critical of China and decreased its coverage of human rights issues in China.¹⁰ Want Want's China subsidiaries received NT\$2.9 billion (US\$96 million) in subsidies from the PRC government between January 2017 and March 2018, indicating the PRC's leverage against businessmen like Tsai.¹¹ In the social media realm, the PRC has made even more direct "investments" by buying the social media accounts of Taiwanese politicians and social media influencers.¹² Fan pages with large amounts of followers suddenly switched over to using simplified Chinese and began helping PRC disinformation go viral (the Taiwanese use traditional Chinese characters). Influencer accounts on Professional Technology Temple (PTT), a local online bulletin board, sold for as much as US\$6,500 prior to the 2018 elections.¹³

PRC influence operations also use social media platforms to spread pro-unification and anti-Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) content. In particular, YouTube is a popular platform among Taiwanese internet users, and disinformation on YouTube has become a greater threat vector since Facebook and Twitter have become more proactive in removing fake content.¹⁴ Disinformation on YouTube is generally more deliberate, as it is more difficult to create and edit a video than it is to write a post or make a meme. However, Puma Shen, an assistant professor at National Taipei University, notes that China's operations on YouTube



In this 27 April 2012 image, pages of rival Taiwan newspapers *Apple Daily* (top half) and *The China Times* depict each other's owners in a fight for ownership of a major chunk of Taiwan's media outlets. Hong Kong's media mogul owner of *Apple Daily* and fierce China critic Jimmy Lai was calling foul as Want Want Group chairman Tsai Eng-meng was seeking to purchase a local cable TV network system in a \$2.4 billion deal that would significantly bolster his influence in Taiwan and his stature in China. Tsai, who had big business interests in China, had been frank about his aim of trying to monopolize media in Taiwan to promote annexation of Taiwan to China. (Photo by Associated Press)

are not very sophisticated. For example, some videos aimed at a Taiwanese audience still had simplified characters in their closed captions.¹⁵

Some recent examples of Chinese disinformation on social media include the following:

- Posts on PTT claiming that the Chinese consulate rescued stranded Taiwanese tourists in Japan during Typhoon Jebi in September 2018 but only if they identified as “Chinese.”¹⁶ The disinformation was intended to spark public anger against the Taiwanese consulate and to portray the Taiwanese government of being incapable of rescuing its

- citizens. This story ended tragically when Su Chii-chen, the director of Taiwan's representative office in Osaka, Japan, committed suicide after receiving criticism online for not providing sufficient assistance to Taiwanese citizens.¹⁷ The IP address of the original PTT posts traced back to Beijing.¹⁸
- Posts “revealing” that the Taiwanese government lied about the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths in Taiwan.¹⁹ This is an attempt to discredit the Taiwanese government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially after Beijing's own mistakes in its early COVID-19 response.



These posts showed linguistic characteristics of having originated in the PRC, and some were even written entirely in simplified Chinese.²⁰

- A LINE (messaging application popular in Taiwan) post claiming that President Tsai Ing-wen's government would take away people's pensions if they traveled abroad without a declaration. This is another example of an attempt to discredit the DPP government. The original article traced back to a content farm in China.²¹

banning discussion of the Tiananmen Massacre, the Dalai Lama, Falun Gong, and broader criticism of China. Eventually, SET canceled *Dahua Xinwen* in May 2012, months after it began negotiations with Chinese authorities on broadcasting its television dramas in the PRC.²³ In online media, pro-independence outlets are almost always blocked in China, while pro-unification outlets are accessible. This impacts the ability of pro-independence media outlets to generate online advertising revenues.²⁴



A 23 April 2019 Chung T'ien (CTi) Television report displays a map that shows Taiwan as a part of China. CTi is a major cable TV network owned by the Want Want China Times Media Group. It drew wide criticism from the Taiwanese public in response to the newscast. The channel has been fined numerous times by the Taiwanese National Communication's Commission for broadcasting inaccurate and defamatory information. Many called for CTi to be once again fined for inaccurate and biased reporting favorable to the People's Republic of China. (Screenshot from CTi)

Finally, the PRC uses economic leverage against Taiwanese media outlets. Newspapers that carry advertisements from PRC commercial entities tend to have a more pro-Beijing message.²² SET, a major cable television station, previously broadcasted a DPP-friendly political talk show *Dahua Xinwen* (Big Talk News). The network began restricting the topics allowed on the program after Kuomintang (KMT) candidate Ma Ying-jeou's election in 2008 and also began

The PRC's disinformation tactics take advantage of weaknesses in Taiwan's media landscape. First, the Taiwanese media environment is highly polarized, and it is easy to exploit controversial issues such as pension reform and same-sex marriage.²⁵ Disinformation on these issues can be domestic, further complicating the attribution concerns.²⁶ Taiwan has a high level of press freedom and a competitive media landscape. These indicators create an environment where the PRC can

spread disinformation with little risk of censorship or penalty.²⁷ Finally, Taiwan has an overwhelming number of internet users; by December 2018, 93 percent of Taiwan's population surfed the World Wide Web.²⁸ More than three-quarters of Taiwan's population use their smartphones to access the news.²⁹

Attribution

As with any effort to fight disinformation, attribution of malign social media activity can be difficult. Even if it is possible to identify a post as originating in China, it is still hard to tell if it was a lone actor or an organized government effort. For example, there is evidence that some of the misinformation and disinformation on COVID-19 was a grassroots effort that stemmed from anger at Taiwan over its decision to limit exports of face masks to China, rather than a government attack.³⁰

Nonetheless, there are strong indicators of a Chinese government-led effort to affect Taiwanese elections and social discourse. Rumors that major airlines were no longer accepting the Republic of China's passport as proof of identity for international flights, although ultimately not attributable, are consistent with the PRC's disinformation themes and tactics.³¹ The PRC's documented recent actions in Hong Kong use tactics of the same playbook and espouse similar themes—a goal of unification and anything opposing unification as foreign interference (from the United States) or terrorism.³²

What Is Taiwan's Response?

Taiwan has not been sitting idle as the PRC expands its influence operation into the country's media ecosystem. Both the Taiwanese government and civil society have stepped up efforts to combat disinformation by banning Chinese internet media platforms, passing legislation on election interference, organizing efforts to fact-check news, and educating the public on media literacy.

The most direct action that the Taiwanese government has taken against China is banning select Chinese media platforms, such as iQIYI (Baidu's video platform) and Tencent video, from the Taiwanese market. The DPP government cites the prevalence of disinformation spread to influence the January 2020 presidential elections as the reason for these bans. However, the

bans have sparked concerns with regard to freedom of speech, and the effectiveness of such bans is debatable as the PRC can simply upload disinformation content on YouTube or Twitch, platforms that remain accessible and are popular among the Taiwanese public.³³

The Taiwanese government also confronted China's disinformation campaign through other executive and legislative action. The Ministry of Justice established the Big Data and Public Opinion Task Force. Security institutions, including the Ministry of National Defense and the National Security Council, have coordinated response groups to Chinese disinformation.³⁴ The Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's legislative body, passed laws in response to the PRC's 2018 election interference. The Public Media Act, passed in 2019, addressed board governance, accountability, and financial independence for public media groups.³⁵ The legislature also updated the Social Order Maintenance Act to criminalize the spread of misinformation online.³⁶ Most visibly, the Taiwanese legislature passed the Anti-Infiltration Act two weeks before the 2020 presidential election, preventing "foreign hostile forces" from making political donations, spreading disinformation, staging campaign events, or otherwise interfering in elections.³⁷ Although the act does not mention China by name, its target is Chinese actors and Taiwanese citizens with connections to China.³⁸ The new law has already succeeded in driving out Master Chain, a pro-China media outlet with funding connections to China.³⁹

Taiwan has an active civil society engaged in fighting disinformation. Civil society organizations that work on disinformation include the following:

- The Taiwan FactCheck Center, a nonprofit initiative launched in 2018 by the Association for Quality Journalism and Taiwan Media Watch. According to the center's website, it does not accept donations from governments, political parties, and politicians in order to maintain its independence.⁴⁰
- The Fakenews Cleaner, a nonprofit founded after the 2018 Taiwanese elections that teaches media literacy to the elderly. Volunteers from the organization conduct in-person workshops at community centers and senior centers to bridge the generational gap in social media usage.⁴¹

Finally, Taiwan is educating its citizens as a part of a long-term strategy of fighting disinformation.



Education is a key indicator of resilience to fake news, and in particular, media literacy education is effective in helping individuals identify misinformation and disinformation.⁴² In Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Boyer's study of nationally representative youths in the United States (ages fifteen to twenty-seven), participants who reported the most media literacy education were also the ones who most consistently spotted the difference between the evidence-based posts and the misinformation they were shown.⁴³ Like Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands, three countries that rank the highest in the Open Society Institute's Media Literacy Index (which only covers Europe), Taiwan has a media literacy curriculum in schools to teach students about digital literacy and misinformation and disinformation.⁴⁴ Audrey Tang, Taiwan's digital minister, supports media literacy as the most useful tool for educating people on identifying misinformation and disinformation.⁴⁵

Case Study: Taiwan's 2018 and 2020 Elections

Taiwan's "nine-in-one local" elections in November 2018—somewhat akin to U.S. midterm elections—were a big loss for the DPP. The KMT reversed the results of the 2014 election results and won thirteen of twenty jurisdictions.⁴⁶ This was an ideal result for the PRC, which had been ramping up pressure against Taiwan since the election of the DPP's Tsai Ing-wen as president in 2016. Tsai resigned as the DPP chairperson after the defeat.⁴⁷

It is impossible to attribute the DPP's electoral defeat directly to interference from Beijing, but disinformation may have been effective in exaggerating existing fractures in Taiwanese politics, including LGBTQ issues and the urban-rural divide.⁴⁸ Tsai's government was well aware of the PRC's attempts at election interference and warned the public on her own social media platforms.⁴⁹ In October 2018, the Ministry of Justice investigated cases of candidate campaigns allegedly receiving funding from the Chinese government or its affiliate organizations.⁵⁰ Despite these efforts, public awareness of the problem lagged. A survey conducted one week after the elections found that 52 percent of respondents did not believe that there was foreign interference in the elections or did not know enough to judge.⁵¹

The Taiwanese government learned the lessons of the 2018 election and was successful in countering the

PRC's disinformation campaign the next time around. In the weeks before the 2020 legislative election, Tsai again sounded the alarm about PRC-sponsored disinformation in Taiwanese media and social networks.⁵² In response, the Taiwanese government strengthened its institutions: every Taiwanese ministry established a team to detect disinformation campaigns and respond rapidly with a counternarrative. The government created a well-funded Department of Cyber Security to guard websites and databases against hackers.⁵³ Taiwan also worked with social media companies to educate the public about misleading social media content. For example, Facebook began tagging fake articles with a correction from the Taiwan Fact Check Center and alerting users who shared the article that it contained inaccurate information.⁵⁴ The Ministry of Justice fined both individuals and television media companies who shared misinformation.⁵⁵ These measures, along with outside events, propelled Tsai to reelection in a landslide victory against KMT candidate Han Kuo-yu, and the DPP maintained its majority in the Legislative Yuan.⁵⁶

What Has the United States Done?

The United States and Taiwan are already strengthening cooperation in combating disinformation in Taiwan. In December 2016, U.S. Congress established the Global Engagement Center (GEC) to counter foreign propaganda and disinformation.⁵⁷ The GEC has been collaborating with Taiwan as a part of these efforts.⁵⁸ In April 2019, the GEC accepted funding applications to crowdsource counterpropaganda work in Taiwan.⁵⁹ The GEC also hosted a U.S.-Taiwan Tech Challenge, an open competition for companies to win a GEC grant used for countering propaganda and disinformation in the region. Trend Micro Taiwan, a company working on information security with the Criminal Investigation Bureau, won the top prize of US\$175,000.⁶⁰

More broadly, the United States has passed bipartisan legislation advancing its commitment to U.S.-Taiwan relations. The Taiwan Travel Act, passed and signed into law in early 2018, allows U.S. officials to meet with their Taiwanese counterparts and allows high-level Taiwanese officials to officially enter the United States and meet with officials.⁶¹ The Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement



Initiative (TAIPEI) Act, passed in 2019, requires the State Department to report to Congress on steps the State Department has taken to help strengthen Taiwan's diplomatic relationships and partnerships around the world annually.⁶² These legislations reinforce the United States' support for Taiwan's democracy and protects Taiwan's international standing.

How Can the United States Help?

Taiwan has proven itself capable in combating the PRC's use of disinformation to interfere in the 2020 elections, but the PRC is not stepping back. Recently, the PRC has been spreading disinformation about COVID-19 in Taiwan to discredit the Taiwanese government, and we can be certain that these efforts will continue. The United States can support Taiwan through the following ways:

Support relationships between U.S.-based social media companies and the Taiwanese government and civil society groups. The most popular social

Baybars Örsek (top), director of the International Fact-Checking Network at the Poynter Institute, meets with Taiwan fact-checkers in December 2019 for a workshop at the Taiwan FactCheck Center in Taipei. (Photo courtesy of Baybars Örsek's Twitter, @baybarsorsek, <https://twitter.com/baybarsorsek/status/1202562487591112704>)

media platforms in Taiwan are U.S.-based companies. Facebook and YouTube were the top two social media outlets for Taiwanese internet users (as of January 2019), and Facebook Messenger, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp were also in the top eight. WeChat was the only Chinese app on the list, and only 32 percent of internet users reported using the platform.⁶³ Twitter, Google, and Facebook are already working with the Taiwanese government on identifying fake news on their platforms. The United States should encourage these efforts by establishing an official channel for cooperation and make public data or research resulting that can help American and Taiwanese researchers



attribute disinformation to the PRC and better educate Taiwanese citizens in identifying fake stories.

Increase funding for grants to Taiwanese civil society groups that fight disinformation. Although not all of Taiwan's fact-checking nonprofits accept foreign government donations, the United States should increase grant funding for those that wish to apply. These organizations can enhance their

media space.⁶⁵ By setting up a forum to facilitate dialogue between Taiwan and our European allies and partners, the United States can help Taiwan's efforts to combat Chinese influence and provide it with the opportunity for deeper international engagement.

Pursue cooperation in developing artificial intelligence (AI) to help combat disinformation. Fact-checking today is still a predominantly manual

“Disinformation, election interference, and information warfare are global problems not limited to Taiwan, and international organizations and nongovernmental organizations will be establishing rules and norms for internet governance and wireless communications.”

effectiveness with additional resources, such as by providing better training for their volunteers, employing more full-time staff to oversee and organize their efforts, and providing more resources for the public to help them navigate Taiwan's traditional and social media landscapes.

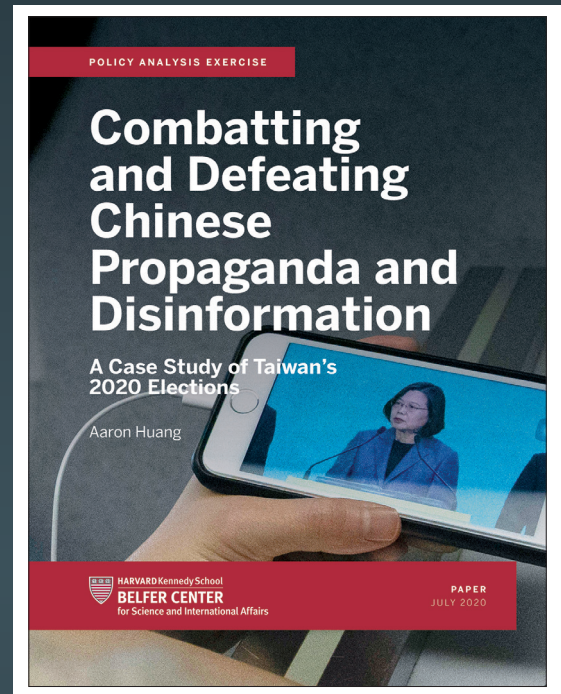
Facilitate relationship building between Taiwan and European countries such as Finland and Latvia that are successful in combating disinformation.

Taiwan is not the only U.S. ally that is facing a threat of hostile social manipulation. NATO allies and the European Union (EU) face a similarly elaborate and targeted disinformation threat from Russia. The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence runs a training program on advanced counterpropaganda techniques to help member states assess and counter Russian propaganda in Eastern Europe.⁶⁴ The EU established the East StratCom Task Force in 2015. The task force “develops communication products and campaigns focused on better explaining EU policies in the Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) ... supports wider EU efforts aimed at strengthening the media environment in the Eastern Partnership region ... [and] reports and analyses disinformation trends, explains and exposes disinformation narratives, and raises awareness of disinformation coming from Russian State, Russian sources and spread in the Eastern neighborhood

process, but Taiwan has already begun to use AI to identify fake news by automatically identifying and deleting content.⁶⁶ It is critical for Taiwan to be ahead in this technological race. China uses AI to generate and spread disinformation, and its ability to do so will only improve.⁶⁷ The PRC could develop AI with the capabilities to generate disinformation faster than Taiwan can identify it, and Taiwan must maintain a technological advantage in AI against the PRC to preserve its independent media environment. Tech companies can also use AI to identify the origins of the disinformation activity and collect data on the prevalence of disinformation from China.⁶⁸

Train a strong cohort of Mandarin speakers who can study Chinese disinformation tactics and engage our Taiwanese partners. Studies have shown that language usage in satire, hoaxes, and propaganda is different than that of real news stories.⁶⁹ A strong grasp of language and culture is critical to understanding disinformation and developing effective tactics in response. The United States should train and hire more Chinese-speaking analysts who can work with Taiwanese teams to monitor Taiwanese social media activity and identify disinformation. These linguists can also bring back best practices for our own fight against Chinese disinformation and election interference. Taiwan, as the main target of Chinese disinformation, understands Chinese information warfare better than any other nation, and a strong cohort of

WE RECOMMEND



Mandarin linguists in our government can help us access this wealth of knowledge.

Advocate for Taiwan's participation in international organizations.

Disinformation, election interference, and information warfare are global problems not limited to Taiwan, and international organizations and nongovernmental organizations will be establishing rules and norms for internet governance and wireless communications. China will no doubt push for rules in accordance with its own interests and authoritarian values.⁷⁰ Taiwan is a U.S. ally in this conversation, and the United States should support Taiwan's participation in the United Nations so it can engage in discussions on these resolutions.

In particular, the United States should encourage Taiwan's participation in future discussions on security issues in communications infrastructure. The Taiwanese government recognizes Chinese-built 5G networks as a threat to Taiwan's cybersecurity, and any backdoor access companies like Huawei may have could disable Taiwan in military conflict. In light of these concerns, Taiwan chose Nokia (Finland) and Chunghwa Telecom (Taiwan) to deliver its first 5G networks.⁷¹ Taiwan also banned Huawei and ZTE equipment for government employees.⁷² By joining international discussions such as the Prague 5G Security Conference, Taiwan would be able to share these security concerns directly with European countries.

More participation in international organizations will also allow Taiwan to have better information to make policy decisions domestically and to fight disinformation from Beijing. A recent and notable example of this is Taiwan's lack of membership in the World Health Assembly, the decision-making body for the World Health Organization. Participation in the World Health Assembly would have allowed Taiwan to access more information about COVID-19 rather than going through

Chinese communist propaganda and disinformation synchronized with other aggressive initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative have the potential to manipulate the world's perception of Beijing, distort America's image globally, and reshape international norms and values on human rights, rule of law, and concepts of national sovereignty. In the interest of exposing China's malign propaganda methodologies, *Combatting and Defeating Chinese Propaganda and Disinformation* provides a case study of China's attempted efforts to control Taiwan's 2020 presidential and legislative elections. It analyzes China's disinformation capabilities and vulnerabilities as it details how Taiwan was able to nullify the effectiveness of information campaigns against opponents of Chinese communist influence in Taiwan. The study aims to promote a fuller understanding of such disinformation operations to enable the U.S. government to better protect America against China's interference in its elections as well as other socioeconomic and sociopolitical institutions, and counter Chinese Communist Party narratives around the world. To view this study, visit <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/combating-and-defeating-chinese-propaganda-and-disinformation-case-study-taiwans-2020>.



Beijing or relying on the United States to get information and resources.⁷³

Conclusion

Although there is always the threat of conventional war, the PRC poses a more urgent threat to Taiwan's media landscape in its quest for reunification. The PRC's malign influence in Taiwan's traditional media and ability to spread propaganda and disinformation

on social media threatens Taiwan's press freedom and democratic process. Taiwan's government and civil society has responded to the PRC's threat in innovative ways. The United States has helped Taiwan fight PRC propaganda and disinformation through the GEC and should continue to do so by connecting Taiwan to companies and allies, increasing funding for Taiwan's efforts to fight disinformation, and advocating for its participation in international organizations. ■

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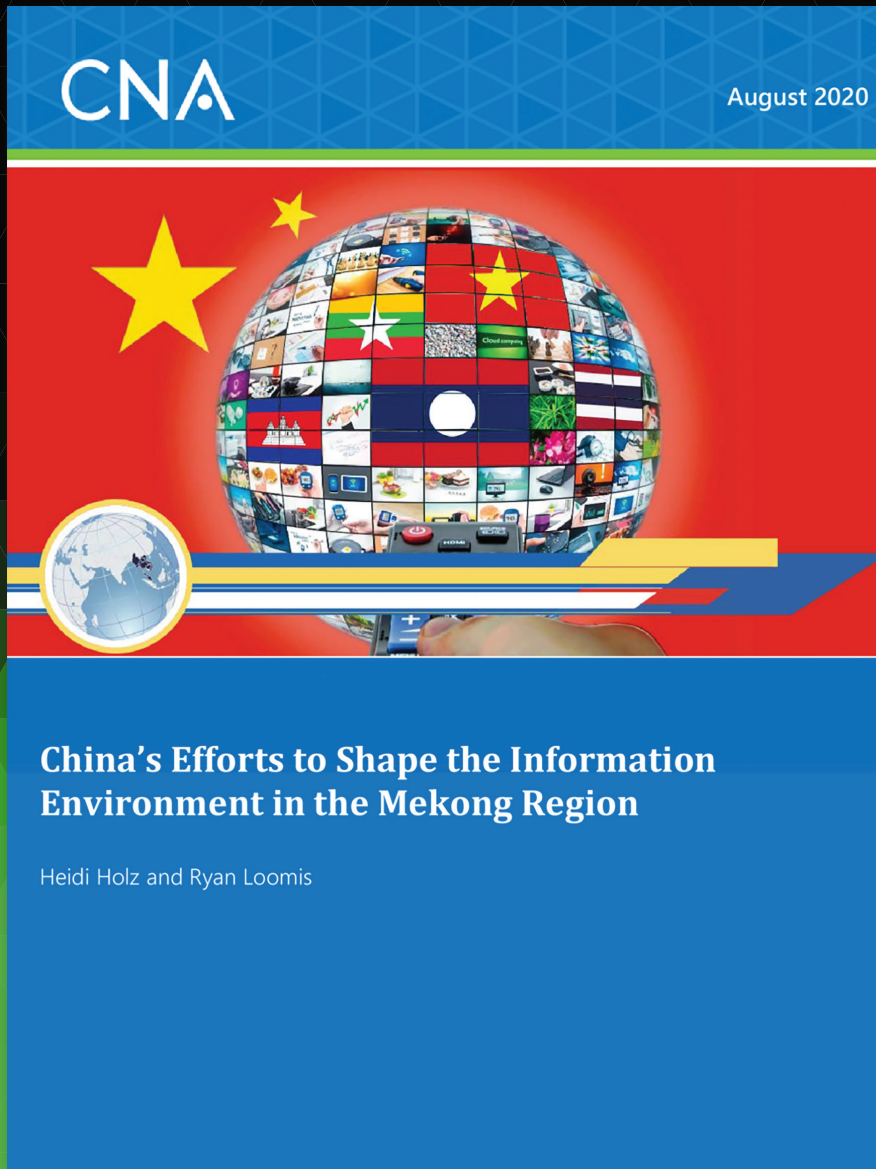
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Military Review

RECOMMENDS



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China's Efforts to Shape the Information Environment in the Mekong Region

Heidi Holz and Ryan Loomis

China's Efforts to Shape the Information Environment in the Mekong Region provides a detailed case study on just one of China's propaganda campaigns—its efforts to shape the information environments of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam to make the people of those nations more vulnerable and receptive to Chinese influence and intimidation. A major value of this study is that it provides detail and insight into the template China employs to manipulate public perceptions in other targeted regions to achieve its political objectives. To that end, the study identifies key communist Chinese narratives and examines each of the tactics, tools, and techniques that China characteristically employs to promote those narratives to local audiences through media and other venues. To view this study, visit https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IIM-2020-U-027917-Final.pdf.