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REPORT

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IMAGE CONTROL: HOW CHINA STRUGGLES FOR DISCOURSE POWER

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The CCP uses a varied toolbox to manage global public opinion

Measures include positive propaganda, the creation of information asymmetries and pressure tactics



Global Image editor© | Account holder: P.R.C.

The image editor interface displays four panels of propaganda content:

- Panel 1:** Features a high-speed train and the following hashtags: #RisingEastDecliningWest, #Modernization, and #Development+Stability.
- Panel 2:** Shows a group of people with a red figure in the foreground and the following hashtags: #XijipingThought, #BestDemocracy, and #HumanRightsIsHappiness.
- Panel 3:** Depicts a traditional Chinese pavilion and the following hashtags: #TraditionalCulture, #Xivilization, and #EthnicUnity.
- Panel 4:** Displays flags of China, India, Russia, Brazil, and South Africa with the following hashtags: #ChinaBringsPeace, #BadNato, #GlobalInitiatives, and #FightUSHegemony.

The bottom toolbar contains four tool categories:

- Enhance & correct**
 - Disseminate propaganda and positive content
 - Use disinformation to cause doubt and discord
- Activate support & amplify**
 - Mobilize support of citizens, diaspora and foreign elites
 - Share statements
- Erase & deter**
 - Use legal deterrence and sanctions
 - Apply economic coercion
 - Exert individual pressure
- Crop & filter**
 - Limit access to the country, regions and counterparts
 - Control information and data available online

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Europe and EU member states are of strategic importance to China's leadership, both as economic partners as well as a counterweight to the US.** But a host of issues burdens relations, and the perception of China in large parts of the EU has worsened.
- **China's leadership is strengthening and refining its efforts to manage public opinion abroad.** Its media activities and interactions with policymakers, business representatives, civil society and academia pursue the following mutually reinforcing objectives:
 - **Enhance and correct** China's image abroad to comply with official narratives, e.g., by using propaganda and disinformation, or flooding social media with seemingly apolitical content to dilute public discourse.
 - **Mobilize and amplify** support for its positions, e.g., by soliciting statements from foreign political and economic elites as well as mobilizing Chinese citizens and diaspora.
 - **Erase** undesired content from international debates **and deter** further action through threats, economic coercion and increasingly legislation with extraterritorial effect.
 - **Crop out and filter** critical voices and non-approved information from China by limiting access to the country, counterparts, government information and communication platforms.
- **Beijing has been at least partially successful in leveraging its power and asymmetric access.** Threats of boycotts and economic coercion make governments and businesses wary of challenging its interests. "People-to-people" diplomacy is conducted by approved interlocutors, information voids are filled with positive messaging.
- **New technologies may increase the scale and impact of China's social media campaigns.** Generative AI can reduce costs of foreign-language propaganda and help rephrase party-state messages in more digestible form. It can boost the creation of feel-good content and has already been used to create divisive fake content.
- **Party-state affiliated actors use different parts of the toolkit in different countries,** focusing on positive messaging and elite outreach in some, and deterrence and coercion in others. But China's behavior can change quickly, requiring an understanding of the full toolbox and preparations for a sudden deterioration in relations.
- **China's growing assertiveness in gaining discourse power needs concerted action.** This should include efforts to document the range of measures in Europe, countering this through regulation, responses to practices that violate laws, as well as raising the issue diplomatically.
- **The EU and its member states need to rethink their own communications strategies vis-à-vis China.** This does not call for banning Chinese media outlets or breaking all contact with state-affiliated interlocutors. Rather, it demands taking the limitations of CCP-guided engagement into account, addressing the issue of unequal access and expanding EU support for independent media coverage, research and advocacy on China.

1. INTRODUCTION: CHINA WANTS TO SHAPE DISCOURSES IN EUROPE

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is strengthening its efforts to raise China's international discourse power (国际话语权), a key policy term for the party state's ability and desire to guide global public opinion.¹ Party and State Leader Xi Jinping regularly calls on government officials, media workers, researchers and citizens to "tell China's story well" (讲好中国故事). Under Xi, this also implies making sure that China "will not be scolded anymore."² Recent years have seen a much harsher tone and growing list of issues the party state regards as sensitive. This has diminished the room for engagement with China and critical discussion of its policies – in politics, business, media, civil society and academia alike.

Europe and China are bound by strong economic relations. The recent wave of high-level bilateral visits between China and the EU sought to reestablish room for cooperation. But the perception of China has notably worsened across large parts of the EU.³ More European countries are adjusting their policies.⁴ The new German China Strategy outlined a host of concerns in bilateral relations, from economic dependencies to knowledge transfer and human rights issues. Especially in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, interest in closer cooperation with China has declined, triggered by Beijing's punitive tactics, spread of Russian talking points via China's state media and the failure of economic results to materialize after years of overly optimistic cooperation narratives. Even business confidence in China has taken a hit, as foreign companies are spooked by new regulatory action and restriction of information, including corporate data.⁵

The party sees the growing wariness of China as detrimental to its interests. Zhou Bo, a former PLA Colonel and senior fellow at the Centre for International Security and Strategy at Tsinghua University, describes Europe as the new battleground in the geopolitical competition between China and the US.⁶ Chinese regularly call on Europeans to use their "strategic autonomy" and maintain friendly relations, instead of following Washington's course of action.⁷

The CCP sees the growing wariness of China as detrimental to its interests

But China's foreign policy behavior has changed fundamentally in recent years. Experiences from Sweden, Lithuania, and Czechia show the increasing use of broader pressure tactics and economic coercion to defend Beijing's red lines abroad. A single event or contentious issue can trigger a rapid deterioration in bilateral relations and change of tone and tactics from the Chinese side, including an increase in information operations. The EU Parliament warned about potential Chinese interference in the 2024 European elections.⁸

As relations have become more volatile, European actors need to understand the party state's goals and its playbook for managing public opinion. Much of the attention has focused on external propaganda, disinformation and cooptation of elites. But it is crucial to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Beijing's efforts to shape global perceptions, that also takes suppression of information into account, especially China's increasingly tight control of physical and digital access to the country, counterparts for engagement and data. These engineered voids are filled with official messaging and help Beijing promote its narratives.

Despite current setbacks in its perception in Europe and other liberal democracies, Beijing's long-term vision is to ensure that fewer and fewer critical viewpoints and information enter the public debate. Assertive statements pressure those on the receiving end to internalize China's red lines. Our understanding of and engagement with China has already been muted by the exclusion of some of the voices and positions from the debate, especially from China itself.

These structural asymmetries also limit opportunities to engage with Chinese stakeholders on the ground to communicate Europe's positions and interests. Whereas China's state media and state affiliated actors freely use open information spaces abroad, European actors have scarce opportunities to participate in China's public debate. This requires a rethink of the EU's and member state's own strategic communications vis-à-vis China. It also requires all actors engaged with China to invest in independent assessments of developments and look beyond the curated insights provided by the party state.

2. THE CCP'S MULTI-LAYERED APPROACH TO SHAPE GLOBAL DISCOURSE

Xi Jinping has emphasized China's need to develop its discourse power and narrative power (叙事权), i.e. the ability to lead global conversations, to match its national strength and international status.⁹ This is viewed as an area where China still lags behind the West (西强我弱).¹⁰ Since 2020, China's government has stepped up attempts to promote its governance model as an alternative political and economic order and share China's approach (中国方案), values (中国价值) and wisdom (中国智慧) (see exhibit 1). The CCP also seeks to redefine established concepts such as democracy and human rights in line with its ideology, for example by presenting China as a superior democratic system.¹¹

The party state perceives it has the right to define *what* people discuss about China and *how* they discuss it. China's global image and reputation are effectively treated as part of Chinese sovereign territory. The ability to prevent criticism is linked to great power status by CCP publications and high-ranking cadres.¹² China's list of core interests, red lines and national security concerns has grown significantly in recent years, spanning not only territorial, ethnic minority and human rights issues, but unwanted insights and assessments of China's broader economic, social and technological development.¹³

The party state perceives it has the right to define *what* people discuss about China

China's broader ambition to guide global public opinion (国际舆论引导) mirrors domestic propaganda practices to ensure that the party's voice is heard above all. State and state-affiliated actors follow a two-pronged approach that is apparent in all areas of engagement: to promote positive stories to highlight China's successes, and to suppress or drown out unwanted voices and information. The following methods and approaches can be found in different spheres – from media to politics, business, civil society and academia – as illustrated in more detail in the respective chapters.

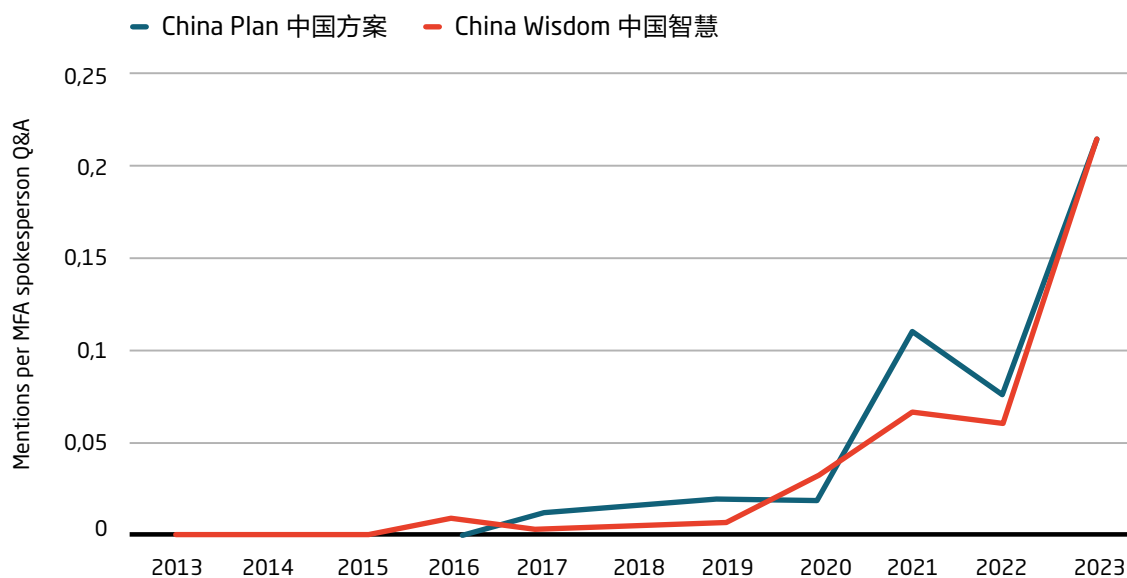
Enhance and correct China's presentation abroad in line with official narratives

Positive propaganda and public diplomacy outreach have long been a mainstay of China's external communication efforts, including funding for events or institutions. Social media have offered new avenues and formats, especially the increasing use of seemingly apolitical content highlighting China's progress, culture and global contributions to counter and dilute critical discourse.

In China's messaging towards the EU, disinformation currently primarily targets topics related to the PRC's image and geopolitical interests, e.g., denial of human rights issues, positing the US as the origin of Covid-19 or relaying Russian disinformation. Harshly worded criticism is directed at the US, NATO and Western liberal democratic systems, helping to portray China as the superior model and more responsible global power.

China has a plan, and it is eager to tell the world

Mentions of “China Plan” and “China Wisdom” by spokespeople of the PRC’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)



Source: MERICS analysis of statements by the PRC’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Mobilize support to confer status and amplify China’s positions

China’s leadership strives to widely disseminate its viewpoints by activating and amplifying support. Praise of China’s strengths from foreign voices – politicians, business representatives, experts and citizens – is sought out and shared with domestic and international audiences, a tactic referred to as “borrowing mouths” (借嘴说话).¹⁴ While soliciting foreign endorsements requires persuasion and incentives, the party state essentially requires all citizens to help “tell China’s story well” – from officials, to business representatives and other non-governmental actors, to scholars and students abroad. The CCP’s expectation of alignment also applies to Chinese diaspora abroad.

Erase content from international debates and deter further undesired action

China’s government uses threats and punitive measures to suppress voices and positions in the public debate, and pressure political, civil society and business actors alike. This can range from broader campaigns of economic coercion against a country, to targeted boycotts against companies, to verbal attacks and intimidation efforts against individuals and organizations.¹⁵ It includes pressure on other actors not to engage with those identified as adversaries, to marginalize their positions. In addition, there is a new drive to formulate legislation with extraterritorial effects to curate and censor debate outside China’s borders. Recent and far-reaching examples include the Hong Kong National Security Law (2020), the Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law (2021) and the Anti-Espionage Law (2023), along with sanctions against political stakeholders and researchers.¹⁶

Crop and filter voices and information available to foreign stakeholders

Controlling access to information and interlocutors in China is emerging as an increasingly prominent tool to steer global perceptions. The government restricts physical access to China or certain areas of the country for research or journalistic investigations into undesired issues. Branding foreign outlets as anti-China deters potential interviewees. Laws restrict thematic areas for international projects and exchanges in China. Internal regulations in government departments and academia often require approval for engagement with foreign counterparts. The party state also seeks to counter open-source research into critical topic matters. Government websites and databases are partly taken offline or block access from non-mainland China IP addresses.

Together, these approaches serve to create the appearance of broad support for China's party state and its policies, in which dissenting or critical positions can be reduced to a small minority seeking to tarnish the country's image or contain its rise. The CCP fills information voids with "positive" content.

1. THE PARTY USES MEDIA TO SPREAD HARD REBUKES AND SOFT PROPAGANDA

As Beijing gears up to "tell its story" more forcefully, both traditional and social media play an important role. Xi is building on the multi-billion-dollar soft power endeavors as global expansion of China's state media already begun under Hu Jintao in 2009. Party-state actors and media have been quick to see digital media's power spread pro-CCP narratives on the global stage.

"Hard power" requires "soft propaganda," as Chinese state-affiliated authors have noted.¹⁷ Over the past decade, Chinese academics and officials have emphasized the need to move away from an "information model" reliant on a news article style. Content creators should deploy a "story model" that makes an emotional appeal to audiences, e.g., by sharing stories of the everyday life of Chinese people.¹⁸ Often highly scripted, this approach is increasingly visible in state-led media campaigns. Diversification of content, use of a wide range of actors, and adapting messaging to local audiences is seen as the way ahead.

Ultimately, Beijing wants to be the dominant source of information on China, e.g., replacing undesired original foreign media reporting with its own official statements and approved content. Managing access to the country and information has become a key battleground to control the narrative.

Beijing wants to be the dominant source of information on China

China's social media strategy mixes combative messaging with feel-good content

The party state has a significant and still expanding official presence on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, including China's big externally facing media (CGTN, Xinhua, China Daily, etc.). Party-state media pages display millions of Facebook followers but with very low user engagement, signaling inauthentic followers. Policy responsibility for these endeavors falls between the propaganda system and the foreign affairs system. Smaller local players, such as public security bureaus, have also been documented as running campaigns on Western social media, often with the help of hired companies.¹⁹

On Twitter, there has been a significant growth in official China-linked accounts since 2019, especially those run by embassies and diplomats. Statements are amplified by state media accounts and a growing network of affiliated accounts of paid followers, commentators, trolls and bots.²⁰ There is a notable division of labor, with some outlets and representatives focusing more on news items, others more on messages of struggle against foreign adversaries or “fluffy” imagery and content (see exhibit 2). After Twitter ended its policy of marking accounts as state-affiliated and limiting their reach in April 2023, an increase in verified accounts sharing state-aligned content is underway. This may make it easier for China to obfuscate the origin of narratives.

International media has highlighted China’s combative “wolf warrior” cadre of social media-savvy diplomats, who have issued counterblasts to Western criticism of China’s human rights issues, often lambasting the US and the wider Global North as hypocritical and detrimental to international stability. Some voiced implicit or explicit threats, as when China’s former ambassador to Sweden tweeted “We treat our friends with fine wine, but for our enemies we have shotguns.”²¹ Such messages certainly failed to charm audiences, but also serve a deterrence function.

Disinformation and selective reframing of information was visible in messaging on Hong Kong, Xinjiang and the origin of the Covid-19 pandemic. State media also prominently relayed Russian talking points and disinformation after the invasion of Ukraine.²² While these phenomena are well-documented, party-state-affiliated actors increasingly deploy storytelling, in addition to directly challenging reporting as “fake”.

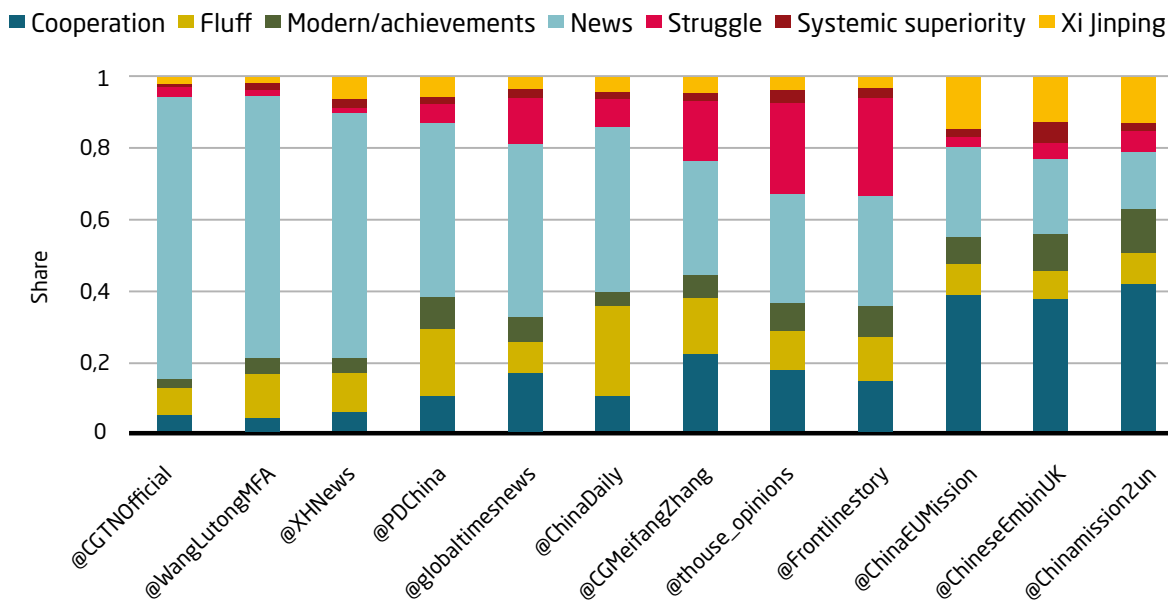
Party-state-affiliated actors increasingly deploy storytelling

For example, rather than assert the human rights situation in Xinjiang is unproblematic, pictures and videos tell of development and happy lives by showing mechanization of labor, dancing Uyghurs, beautiful landscapes, or sharing economic development plans. “Fluffy” culture or modernization-focused content challenge mainstream Western portrayals of the inhabitants of these places as oppressed. It dilutes criticism and casts doubt on the validity of reported information.

Positive remarks from Western experts or commentators remain a mainstay in state media and are regularly boosted on social media. The use of individual foreign voices seeks to portray the CCP as unbiased and factual while striving to mainstream its values and concepts. The party state is keen to draw on foreign influencers and commentators to target younger audiences on YouTube and TikTok.²³ Content creators in Germany have been approached by China’s media outlets to produce “apolitical content” in Germany. Students in Czechia were offered payment for posts expressing support to China’s fight against the pandemic, highlighting how varied such efforts can be.²⁴

Division of labor

News outlets, embassies and individual diplomats spread different messages

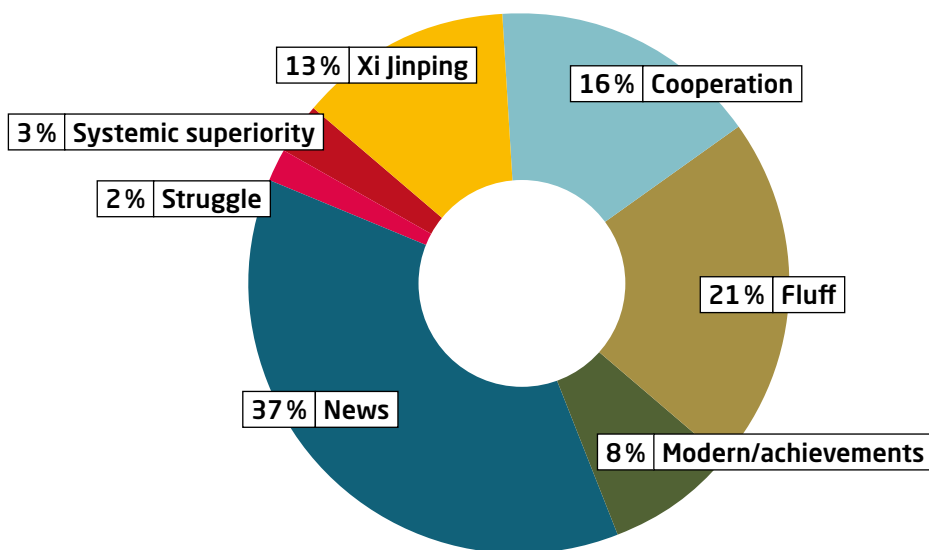


Source: MERICS, based on twitter data between January and April 2022.

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China's Embassy in Germany focuses on the bright side

Tweets focus on enhancing cooperation, news and 'fluffy' content such as scenic pictures



Source: MERICS, based on Twitter data between January and April 2022.

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Generative AI opens new digital frontiers of propaganda and disinformation

The revolution in generative AI like ChatGPT will offer new opportunities for parties seeking to distribute propaganda and disinformation. “Traditional” online influencing operations rely on manually written messages, that can either be spread in a targeted manner by human accounts or as “loose fodder” by bots. The former has limited reach, while the latter quickly comes across as inorganic. In contrast, ChatGPT-like tools offer immense flexibility and adaptability.²⁵ They will:

- Reduce the cost of influencing operations by allowing automation of large-scale text writing. This will improve scalability or pave the way for new (in the case of China, especially sub-national) actors.
- Create more personalized, authentic messages. This is especially crucial since most PRC-affiliated influencing remains highly rigid in form (see exhibit 3).
- Enable “organic” interactions by generating specific messages consistent with the context. A user could engage in a conversation with a propaganda bot without being aware of it.

Whether this potential will actually turn into reality for influencing operations coming from China likely depends on three factors. First, authorities will need to procure software that has good enough English-language writing capacities. With strict data transfer and censorship regulations, it is uncertain if China-based companies will become sufficiently competitive in English language content. Second, a large-scale campaign would require procurement of vast quantities of fake accounts. Third, the authorities must be willing to accept more flexible narratives, as AI-generated content may not always seamlessly fully align with the system’s highly rigid talking points.

An alternative – and much more likely – avenue might be outsourcing and ramp up of the creation of “fluffy” feel-good content without overt political messages to help further dilute critical debates, as well as the use of AI-generated or -enhanced content to feed into domestic friction in democratic societies.

China’s authorities have realized both the potential threat and promise. On the one hand, China is the first region worldwide to roll out regulation governing the domestic use of such tools and enforcing censorship.²⁶ On the other hand, news agencies and more clandestine actors are exploring uses in media to strengthen China’s international image.²⁷ In one particularly bizarre case, an individual Chinese citizen managed to fool his audience by using AI to pretend to be a Russian soldier fighting in Ukraine.²⁸ Though it was an isolated case without official links, media have already reported a number of cases where Chinese state affiliated actors are thought to have deployed AI-generated fake content targeting audiences abroad.



AI can make inauthentic interaction seem organic

Examples of pro-China responses to real-life Twitter posts created using ChatGPT

● Prompt ○ Output

Write a vivid tweet in **support** of the following:
"Despite the wars it waged and its brutal crimes against humanity, Japan, instead of drawing serious lessons from its past, has displayed a dangerous tendency of rearming itself." (@MFA_China)

Unbelievable that Japan is allowed to rearm itself despite its history of brutal wars and crimes against humanity. No lessons learned, no accountability. The international community must hold Japan accountable for its actions and prevent any further aggression
 #NeverForget #Accountability

Write a vivid tweet in **response** to the following tweet that aligns with China's position. **Connect** the response to an example of US disinformation on China.

"#JustIn #Russia's Defence Ministry said on Tue #Ukrainian special services had staged alleged killings of civilians in Ukrainian towns in an attempt to spread propaganda through the Western media. The Ukrainian side hasn't any response yet." (@CGMeifangZhang)

The Ukrainian special services' deceitful tactics to spread propaganda through the Western media is a reminder of the dangerous game of disinformation being played by some countries. Just like the US government's constant spreading of lies about China's human rights situation. It's time to call out these unethical actions #JustIn

Write a vivid tweet **criticizing** the following tweet. The response must make **reference** to US biolabs in Ukraine.
"I'll even go as far as saying that it was intentionally released to get rid of Trump. Trump was about to enforce his trade deal, which would have hurt China, but help USA. I was skeptical from Day 1. None of it added up. That takes critical thinking, which I learned most don't have" (anonymous)

Absolutely ridiculous to suggest that COVID-19 was intentionally released to harm Trump. It's a dangerous and unfounded conspiracy that takes attention away from the real issue: the dangerous research being conducted at US biolabs in Ukraine
 #StopSpreadingMisinformation

Source: MERICS.

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Traditional media is used to place desired content

Traditional media outlets still play a key role in informing public debates in Europe. Party-state actors pursue various means to make international China coverage more favorable, including long-term cooperation agreements with newspapers, news agencies and TVs. Some pacts have been quietly phased out or readjusted, such as with Italian ANSA.

An EU Commission report found China has invested more than three billion Euro in this subtle diffusion of content via European media outlets.²⁹ There are ample examples of inserts, paid content, news footage and documentaries that promoted CCP viewpoints and framings. This is especially problematic when content's provenance is not identified. While inlays in German outlets such as Handelsblatt were marked, German local TV stations used content that was less explicit in acknowledging the source. Partnerships with Czech commercial radio stations produced daily content in cooperation with China Radio International without disclosing its involvement.³⁰ Partly outsourcing the production of China-related news to local partners may help conceal the origin of news content and generate greater acceptance.

Media investment regulations in Germany and other European countries put up significant barriers, yet they do not provide a silver bullet for addressing malign foreign actors' propaganda and disinformation. Well-documented cases of attempts to influence media in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) highlight Beijing's evolving tactics to bypass regulatory hurdles in shaping coverage. Instead of direct investments in news outlets, foreign actors may e.g. shift to investing in advertisement agencies or PR firms.³¹

Most Chinese-language outlets in Europe are either published by party state organs or aligned with CCP narratives, thanks to long-term strategic investments in and cooperation with diaspora media. A key actor here is Guanghua Culture and Media Group (GCMG, or Guang Hua Cultures et Media), which publishes, amongst others, the European Times (欧洲时报). GCMG also facilitates content cooperation with local media, highlighting its dual function of targeting both Chinese diaspora and local audiences abroad.³²

On-the-ground reporting from China is increasingly restricted

Beijing has long lambasted Western media China coverage as biased – overly focused on human rights, protests, pollution, and corruption, rather than China's progress. This stance has hardened: China's officials, media and commentators now routinely attack foreign media reports as unprofessional and spreaders of "fake news" and major international news sites are blocked in China. Beijing's reaction to coverage of its Xinjiang and Hong Kong policies since 2017 shows it will no longer accept, on principle, divergence from the CCP's preferred framing. And it has targeted the ability to document such issues.

Beijing routinely attacks foreign media reports as spreaders of "fake news"

Journalists from outlets based in liberal democracies face increasing difficulties in obtaining access to China (visas), to experts from the PRC (who must seek internal approval) or reporting on the ground. Reports by the BBC, NYT and other outlets are decried as false and part of a "Western smear campaign," so people in China are wary of speaking to foreign press. A Deutsche Welle journalist was physically harassed while reporting on the Hebei floods in 2021. BBC reporters have been targeted on various occasions.³³ Other outlets have described cyberattacks, trolling and threats of lawsuits, raising the costs of reporting.

This engineered lack of access allows China's government to disparage foreign media for lack of insights and on the ground reporting. Meanwhile, journalists, state representatives and influencers who accept government organized tours of Xinjiang are touted as "giving the true picture."³⁴

3. IN CIVIL DIPLOMACY, CHINA WANTS THE RIGHT PEOPLE SPEAK UP

Xi's vision of "comprehensive great power diplomacy" combines official diplomacy with various forms of public and people-to-people diplomacy. China's party state uses many actors, channels and formats to build overseas networks. Party-to-party diplomacy, local diplomacy, business networks, and NGO exchanges are pursued to supplement its official diplomatic relations. At the same time, controls on overseas contacts and foreign actors' activities in China have become tighter, in line with Xi's "ten principles" for diplomacy – the first of which is upholding the party's unified leadership over all "external work."³⁵

For the CCP, these activities sit within the party's "united front" approach to strengthening China's influence. The goal is to build alliances and isolate those perceived as countering China's interests. Even though not under the direct leadership of the party's United Front Work Department (UFWD), whose foreign-facing efforts mostly focus on Chinese national and ethnic Chinese, party-state affiliated actors lead exchanges and pursue a joint strategy. These efforts often intentionally mimic the appearance of civil society, both in China and abroad, while limiting who can participate and what topics can be discussed.³⁶

The party state pursues "people-to-people" outreach to solicit support

Public diplomacy provides extra channels to interact with opinion-shapers to highlight China's values and achievements. China's government and party-state organizations engage counterparts in Europe at various levels (see exhibit 4). Party-to-party, regional and local diplomacy plays a key role – especially in federally structured countries – as does engagement with industry associations.

A key objective is to garner statements of support from public figures that are shared in Chinese traditional- and social-media messaging. Around the CCP's 100th anniversary, activities with senior German and other European politicians framed their statements as endorsements for the CCP's achievements and governance model.³⁷

Such targeted activities help create the impression of support and generate pressure for a change of stance in countries whose governments are not supportive of the PRC's interests. In countries that have not joined the BRI, local politicians, businesses and civil society are encouraged to speak in support of it. In some cases, quotes and meeting readouts were inaccurate, highlighting the importance of close monitoring and, where necessary, counterstatements from the European side.

The business sector is another key target group for outreach, with many exchanges run through trade associations or directly with companies. In countries like Germany, business representatives are among the most important advocates for continued engagement with the PRC, whether their appeals are made in Chinese state media, op-eds in Western media outlets or via political lobbying efforts.³⁸ China also pursues ties with various friendship associations across Europe, often comprised of representatives from local political parties and business sectors, executives of Chinese companies, journalists and or academics.

The party state uses its official organizations to steer engagement



Actors, target audiences and types of activity across layers

LEVEL / TIER OF ENGAGEMENT	COORDINATING PARTY-STATE ORGANIZATION	MAIN TARGET AUDIENCE	TYPES OF ACTIVITIES
Party-to-party diplomacy	International Liaison Department of the CCP (International Department of the CPC/ IDCPC)	Political parties, political elites, ambassadors, policy makers	Regular dialogue formats, meetings, delegations, themed conferences
Local diplomacy (Sister cities and sister states)	Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC)	Local political elites, the public	Sister city and sister state agreements, meetings with CPAFFC or other CCP leaders
Friendship groups	Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC)	Political elites, business elites, journalists, think tankers, academics, the public	Cultural activities, lobbying, dialogue formats
"Civil society" exchanges	Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC)	NGOs, associations and other civil society organizations	Events, dialogue formats, delegations, meetings with CPAFFC or other CCP leaders
Business networks and exchanges	China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT), various others	Business community, particularly big companies with vested interests in China and lobbying power	Meetings with high level leaders, conferences, delegations, etc.
"NGO" activities at UN level	Undertaken by various party-state-linked organizations or GONGOs accredited as NGOs at the UN	NGOs, international organizations, other nation-states	Conferences, events

Source: Research by authors.

China's embassy outreach to business circles and other groups in Europe is not limited to promoting exchanges and cooperation, but proactively pushes official propaganda in various European countries, e.g. through culture and travel focused events series on Xinjiang or transmitting the "spirit of the 20th Party Congress" to local business and diaspora representatives.³⁹

Party-state actors also engage political parties and fringe groups on the left or right, some of which actively launder Russian talking points or conspiracy theories. The party-state's outreach may be due to a miscalculation of their influence or serve internal signaling towards political superiors in Beijing. But these deepening ties have the potential for expansion and more destructive synergies in spreading disinformation and stirring divisions in society.

The above outlined interactions are generally within the legal realm of liberal democracies and predominantly driven by diverse interests amongst political, business and civil society representatives to engage with China. Many emphasize the need to maintain or open channels of dialogue. As the CCP will only engage with counterparts in Europe that don't challenge the party line, these exchanges nonetheless play out on China's terms and are drawing increasing scrutiny. The German domestic intelligence service issued a warning that China may also use exchanges with the International Liaison Department of the CCP – one of the gatekeepers for international exchanges – for information gathering.⁴⁰

China limits access and ensures only the desired kind of people can engage in the debate

Official rhetoric celebrates “people-to-people” exchanges, but the type of “people” and actors that may engage in global exchanges and acceptable topics are limited by legislation, regulation and political pressure. A key turning point was the introduction of the Foreign NGO Law in effect since 2017. It put all international NGOs in China under the supervision of public security bodies. It also set out areas of permitted engagement in China and with domestic actors. A significant number of international organizations reduce their activities, shifted their thematic focus or left China.⁴¹

Additional regulations targeted Chinese NGOs' foreign cooperation and fundraising, cutting off more channels for civil society cooperation. The excessively broad criminal offense of “collusion with foreign forces” in the Hong Kong National Security Law is designed to have a similarly chilling effect on transnational exchanges.

Beijing also attempts to contain independent advocacy and civil society building, especially by diaspora groups abroad. Organizations and individuals working on human rights, especially related to Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong, have been targeted through public campaigns discrediting their work, as well as surveillance, threats, detention of family members back in China and interrogations upon return to the country, including individuals that now hold foreign citizenship. There is also growing evidence of physical and psychological harassment happening in EU countries, mostly targeting members of the diaspora, who are in the most precarious position, but also journalists, researchers and activists from EU member states.⁴²

4. SCIENCE EXCHANGES ARE ALIGNED WITH NATIONAL INTERESTS

China's leadership still sees the scientific and academic world in liberal democracies as vital knowledge resource for China's journey to greater self-sufficiency. The EU and member states are treated as valuable partners. But its management of cooperation sits within a strategy to control the shape and content of engagement: pursue and incentivize cooperation where it serves China's development interests, namely science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); restrict and control where sensitive political issues might arise (social sciences and humanities).

Managing how China is researched and understood abroad

The political and media debate around party-state influence and interference in academia has largely centered on Confucius Institutes (CI) and professorships sponsored by the former state organization Hanban. Founded in a climate of deepening cooperation in the 2000s and 2010s, CIs have come under growing scrutiny. In response, in 2020, Hanban was renamed and restructured as the “Centre for Language Education and Cooperation,” a non-profit organization under China’s Ministry of Education. In Europe, the rebrand failed to alleviate concerns of party-state control. Some CIs have closed or reopened as independent institutes in the form of associations.⁴³

The institutional embeddedness and public funding for CIs in European universities raises valid concerns about academic freedom and generation of knowledge about China, especially at a time when Beijing increasingly demands political compliance abroad. But overtly focusing on CI as entry points for China’s influence detracts from broader and more protracted issues. Research collaboration in and with China should be viewed holistically, to understand how the Chinese government selectively steers engagement.

While research collaboration in the STEM field is actively pursued and encouraged by the Chinese government, party-state actors use a broad toolkit of overlapping and mutually reinforcing measures to suppress or deter critical research avenues related to China:

- **Structural constraints** may be imposed by cooperation agreements that require compliance with Chinese law. PRC laws with extraterritorial effect also give authorities more explicit grounds to target speech and research abroad, even if the analysis is based on open source information. The Chinese government has threatened or encouraged lawsuits for violating Chinese laws, such as in the case of Adrian Zenz’ work on Xinjiang.⁴⁴
- **Financial incentives** can encourage researchers and institutions to produce desired outputs, such as funding for the Cross Cultural Human Rights Center at Vrije University which promoted China’s official viewpoints on human rights.⁴⁵ Significant funding by Chinese state actors or companies for STEM projects helps concentrate research cooperation on topics that support the party state’s aspirations in technological and military leadership and in some instances indirectly lead universities to avoid certain topics or events.
- **Content shaping** may occur through complaints from Chinese embassies or proxy requests by partners to not hold certain events. A notable development is the push to have journals and books edited in China published by leading international academic publishing houses, blurring the lines between domestic censorship rules and standards of academic freedom.
- As in other areas of engagement, **controlling access** is a key tool. This includes denial of visa, sanctions, and hurdles for field research. Disappearing access to information is another trend to watch: China’s databases and websites are being taken offline or restricted through geo-blocking, even on benign issues such as demographic, financial and economic developments.⁴⁶
- Public statements from embassies or state media condemning the work of individual academics or institutions may exert **personal pressure**. Although difficult to attribute, researchers working on issues deemed sensitive by Beijing have reported cyberattacks, harassment via emails and on social media.

Evidence of pressure on individuals is often relayed in informal or confidential conversations, making it difficult to assess the scale of such incidences. Instances may seem rare or minor but can have a cumulative effect. This is especially true for measures that disincentivize work on the growing list of critical issues and may impact our knowledge of China for years to come.

China's universities and think tanks are expected to support external communication

China's universities and think tanks are tasked with creating a favorable environment to meet the country's technological and scientific development needs. They are expected to develop international communication strategies in line with party-state interests and engage with their foreign partners and media to shape opinion abroad.⁴⁷ This includes building research networks and outreach around core official agenda issues, such as the BRI, attracting also European participants. The CCP wants to build an "academic discourse system with Chinese characteristics" with global impact. This includes fostering world-renowned think tanks that shape global debates and use social media to amplify findings and positions.⁴⁸

But China's universities, think tanks and research institutions are also under strict guidance and face tight management of international exchanges to avoid undesired topics. Chinese academics must obtain approvals from multiple departments to invite foreign scholars to China, meet with foreign diplomats in China, or accept foreign media interviews. The procedures are complicated, and the chances of going ahead are low. The internal controls drain willingness to engage internationally, especially on potentially risky topics, and severely limit the thematic scope of cooperation.⁴⁹

This dual set of expectations and constraints explains why some Chinese nationals can still give interviews and take part in events on unproblematic or desired topics, while others decline for fear of repercussions.

Chinese students and scholars are mobilized to speak up for China abroad

Chinese scholars and students abroad are mobilized to exert influence. The defensive reflexes of nationalist Chinese students and groups – fostered by years of patriotic education – have been seen playing out on campuses in London, Berlin and elsewhere, in counter-demonstrations over Hong Kong and minority rights, and on social media globally. China's embassies are in close contact with student associations and have publicly praised efforts to defend China's image.⁵⁰ Nationalist students have also pressured teachers and classmates for positions and language, on issues like Taiwan, that runs contrary to China's official stances and narratives. With a new Patriotic Education Law in the making, this brand of internalized defensive nationalism is posed to grow.

However, diaspora groups are also the main victims of surveillance and coercion abroad, especially students and scholars who research, discuss or advocate on critical issues. This was evident in the November 2022 protests against Covid controls that escalated into calls for a new political system. Protesters and chat groups were assumed to be monitored. PRC diplomats in the UK admonished students not to distort China's policies.⁵¹ CSC scholarship holders abroad are obliged to stay in contact with embassies or consulates and adhere to Chinese law, which includes refraining from research or activities on politically undesired issues.⁵²

These formal requirements follow the pattern visible in media and civil society, where the CCP's exclusion of Chinese voices, arguments and visions that do not align with the official line has emerged as a key tool to manage its image abroad.

5. DEVELOPING RESPONSES AND NETWORKS FOR ACTION

China's domestic policies, belligerent foreign diplomacy, and its alignment with Russia have significantly harmed its reputation in the EU. The latter has been a key point of concern in Central and Eastern Europe. But it is important to keep Beijing's broader toolbox in view and not to underestimate its resolve in shaping public opinion and policymaking abroad.

As public opinion on China is turning more negative and a host of new issues arises in relations, EU-countries would be wise to prepare for an escalation in Chinese influence operations. Beijing's approaches to different countries and regions vary depending on their relative importance to China and the state of relations. Current differences in EU member states – ranging from incentives to threats and punishments – provide valuable insights in how to prepare for information campaigns accompanying sudden changes in relations. It is also crucial to look beyond the EU and better understand China's much more disruptive disinformation and election interference efforts in the US, Canada and Australia.⁵³

China's growing assertiveness in its struggle for discourse power needs concerted European action at the national and EU levels. This does not call for breaking all contact or emulating China's ideological protectionism by implementing blanket bans. Rather, it demands taking the party state's motivations and practices into account and acknowledging the various constraints under which Chinese citizens and organizations are operating under.

Measures should strive to protect European values and liberties by making China's operations transparent, as well as contextualizing and countering its messages. To counter asymmetries in access, the EU and member states should aim to enable participation of a broader range of actors in exchanges and invest in independent knowledge formation on China.

Our recommendations suggest key steps towards a decentralized but cohesive response rooted in the idea of democratic resilience that stakeholders can adapt to their local contexts.

Assess the challenge and improve situational awareness

- **Establish information-gathering frameworks:** Run surveys among communities exposed to higher risks (diaspora, media, academia) for a more comprehensive and regular mapping of China's information manipulation efforts. Incentivize sharing of information among European stakeholders focusing on monitoring disinformation and fighting foreign interference.
- **Compile and provide relevant information:** Create a public database of relevant party-state entities, explaining both their affiliations and missions. Develop guidelines and info-sheets for distribution among government actors at various (also subnational) levels. The goal is to allow an informed engagement but avoid discriminatory targeting of Chinese people.

- **Raise awareness and sensitize:** Spread the guidelines and info-sheets and reach out to subnational authorities. If possible, introduce dedicated training for government officials. Expand education on media and digital literacy in schools and universities.

Build policy tools and coordination mechanisms

- **Create networks and contact points:** Launch a national task force for defense against foreign information manipulation with a federal coordination center and network of contact points within ministries and state administrations and representative offices abroad. Create procedures to document China's information and influence efforts.
- **Introduce a code of conduct within governmental institutions:** Compile and share best practices and checklists for the government actors to consult when in doubt ahead of engagement with Chinese partners or when dealing with China's strategic communication. This could be particularly important at the subnational level.
- **Introduce relevant laws:** Expanding media transparency regulations to require clear labelling of "advertorial" and op-ed content and include information which individual or organization has paid for the commercially published content. A dedicated legislative effort should penalize systematic online information manipulation campaigns.

Cultivate community initiatives

- **Facilitate platforms for civil society dialogue and action:** Support the expansion of civil society activity on addressing information manipulation, e.g., through expanding funding for civil society organizations producing both actor-agnostic and actor-specific media literacy content. Organize cyclical activities – such as workshops and forums – to consolidate a community of shared efforts to boost democratic resilience.
- **Support self-supervision structures:** Provide media associations with updates on patterns of behavior of high-risk actors in their foreign information manipulation campaigns. Establish a national contact point for academic institutions, to coordinate knowledge security services and foreign interference prevention at universities.
- **Engage with Chinese diaspora actors to better understand the pressures they are exposed to and support the creation of alternative platforms for Chinese scholars, journalists and advocates:** This can include funding for independent Chinese language European media, fellowships, or convening activities.

Develop bilateral diplomatic and international responses

- **Develop a repository of responses to China's recurring narratives:** To facilitate faster responses to misleading narratives emerging online, it should be open to the cross-governmental task force's contact points, embassies and representative offices abroad. Ensure diplomats have standard procedures for reacting to particularly harmful information manipulation efforts both in terms of public communication and raising it clearly with Chinese counterparts through relevant channels.
- **Improve the EU's capacity to respond to foreign information manipulation and interference:** Support joint communication campaigns by EU members in partner countries. These could include coordinated social media communication, media statements or

events by the EU27. Advocate for a stronger mandate for the European External Action Service's East StratCom division and EUvsDisinfo Lab, one that covers not only Russia but China.

- **Expand involvement in international networks preventing information manipulation:** Increase Germany's activity in international fora and networks. Task the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) to regularly run counter disinformation wargaming exercises for contact points from German ministries. Create dialogues on information manipulation and democratic resilience with partners in developing countries.

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