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Information Warfare on United States' Citizens: How China Weaponized COVID-19

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Abstract: The People's Republic of China (PRC) is conducting an information warfare (IW) campaign against the United States (U.S.) and other strategic competitors in an attempt to protect its

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interests and limit its strategic losses caused by COVID-19. The PRC went through great lengths to misrepresent the severity of the virus and suppress information that would have potentially helped the international community. Once it realized it could no longer suppress this emerging threat, it shifted its IW campaign to projecting misinformation and blaming the U.S. for the virus' rapid spread. The following assessment categorizes the PRCs IW campaign and briefly highlights the growing need for a whole of government approach to protect the U.S against adversary IW campaigns.

On December 31, 2019, The People's Republic of China (PRC) verified to the World Health Organization (WHO) that a pneumonia of unknown cause was reported in Wuhan, China. This would later be known as the Novel Coronavirus 2019 or **COVID-19**. On January 10, 2020, the PRC reported its first COVID-19 casualty. Two days later, the virus made its first appearance outside of mainland China and on January 21, 2020, the **United States announced its first COVID-19** case.

As known cases of the virus spread, the world's attention became increasingly focused on China with health experts, media, and world leaders seeking answers. Instead of initially allowing experts to help uncover the dangers of COVID-19, the PRC waged a complex, multifaceted information warfare (IW) campaign to downplay the dangers of the virus, deflect blame and ultimately **protect its interests**.

Although not as easily observed and understood as a physical warfare campaign, the effects of this IW campaign are equally devastating. The confusion created by this campaign caused the world to delay recognizing the seriousness of the virus, created doubts and uncertainty regarding the best way to slow the virus, and is enabling the virus' rapid spread. This campaign

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is a contributing factor in the U.S. losing more lives to the virus than the entirety of the Vietnam War and [all subsequent armed conflicts](#) in which the country has been involved.

The United States Government (USG) understands that it needs to increase its ability to operate in the Information Environment (IE). While some progress has been made, it still remains unprepared to counter complex IW campaigns as the one that is currently being waged by PRC. This inability is directly harming U.S. interests and increasing the cost, in both lives and economic effects, of the pandemic. The following assessment demonstrates that the U.S. must quickly close the gap in our ability to counter IW campaigns and defend our interests in the global IE by developing a rapid, whole of government capability directly linked and co-located with a fully resourced and empowered Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of State (DoS). To accomplish this, we propose the reestablishment of the defunct U.S. Information Agency (USIA) as an independent national level organization that can task, coordinate and synchronize U.S. IW efforts in the IE.

The PRC's Information Warfare Campaign

The PRC is executing a complicated, multifaceted IW campaign. Some analysts have argued that once it was apparent to the PRC that their economy was going to take a massive hit due to COVID-19, its "strategic competitiveness moving forward was critically dependent that the economies of its strategic rivals should also be forced into decline".^[1] The following analysis demonstrates that the PRC's IW campaign appears to be geared towards protecting PRC investments and increasing the COVID-19 cost for its strategic rivals.

For the PRC to achieve their desired objective in the early stages of this campaign, they focused on two main efforts: suppressing information and creating confusion. The PRC

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suppressed potentially damaging information that it perceived as endangering its worldwide investments. Simultaneously, the PRC began to rapidly disseminate false information in an attempt to highlight its ability to deal with the pandemic, deflect blame regarding the cause of the pandemic, and create an overall sense of confusion about the virus in order to raise the cost of COVID-19 for its competitors.

Suppressing Information

The PRC attempted to suppress information regarding the existence of COVID-19 and when those efforts failed they shifted to suppress the fact the virus could spread via human-to-human contact. On [December 31, 2019](#) after a U.S. program designed to monitor emerging diseases picked up a COVID-19 news report, PRC authorities disclosed the existence of a potentially infectious disease. Under Article 9 of the World Health Assembly, countries are required to inform the WHO within 24 hours of an official inquiry regarding a potential disease that may spread internationally. The PRC chose to validate the existence of the virus in an attempt to remain in good standing with the [international community](#). Although they [verified](#) the existence of COVID-19, in their confirmation, the PRC stated that the virus [could not be spread](#) via human-to-human transmission, despite evidence that it was spreading rapidly through the city of Wuhan with cases dating back as early as [December 1, 2019](#), including multiple reports of doctors being infected by patients. ^[2]

On December 30, 2019, Dr. Ai Fen, the director of the emergency department of the Central Hospital of Wuhan, reported the existence of an unknown respiratory virus to her colleagues and superiors. Instead of acting on the information, her superiors quickly reprimanded her. She recounted the admonishment in an essay titled, "[The One Who Supplied the Whistle](#)," published in *China's People (Renwu)* magazine.

Following publication, the article was quickly deleted from Chinese social media sites, removed from [Renwu magazine](#), and Dr. Ai was reported [missing](#). Despite the PRC's attempt to control the narrative, Chinese citizens, motivated to warn the public of the emerging threat, found creative ways to avoid the PRC's strong censorship. Tactics such as writing the article backwards, inserting intentional typographical errors, and emojis, and sharing the article in fictional languages such as [Klingon](#) allowed the article to spread through various platforms.

Following Dr. Ai's warning, Dr. Li Wenliang, a Chinese ophthalmologist and physician at the Central Hospital of Wuhan, warned his colleagues about his own discovery of a possible outbreak of an illness that resembled [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome \(SARS\)](#). When his warnings were left unheeded, he shared his findings publicly. The PRC considered Dr. Li's remarks a violation under [Article 19](#) (spreading rumors, disturbing social order, or disrupting social stability) of China's Provisions on News Information Services. On January 2, 2020, Wuhan police, governed by the [PRC's Ministry of Public Security](#), summoned Dr. Li and his colleagues and [threatened](#) to detain them for "[making false comments on the Internet](#)". On January 10, 2020, Dr. Li reported that he was beginning to show symptoms of the new disease. On February 7, 2020, he succumbed to [COVID-19](#).

The "inability" of the virus to spread via human-to-human contact was used as justification for keeping the city of Wuhan, with more than 11 million people and 800,000 tourists per year, operating as normal through a major Chinese Communist Party conference held on [January 12-15](#), with authorities claiming zero new cases in this period. Despite evidence to the contrary, the PRC did not confirm human-to-human transmission of the virus until [January 22, 2020](#), more than one month after the first case. Following this announcement,

Hubei province, including its largest city Wuhan, was put into lockdown. Importantly, although the state-run Chinese press announced the existence of a 'novel type of pneumonia' to the WHO on December 31, 2019, Wuhan's largest newspaper made no mention of the virus until [January 20, 2020](#). The PRC's restriction of open reporting regarding the virus allowed it to continue to spread unrestricted within the country and eventually throughout the globe, buying time for the PRC to set its strategy.

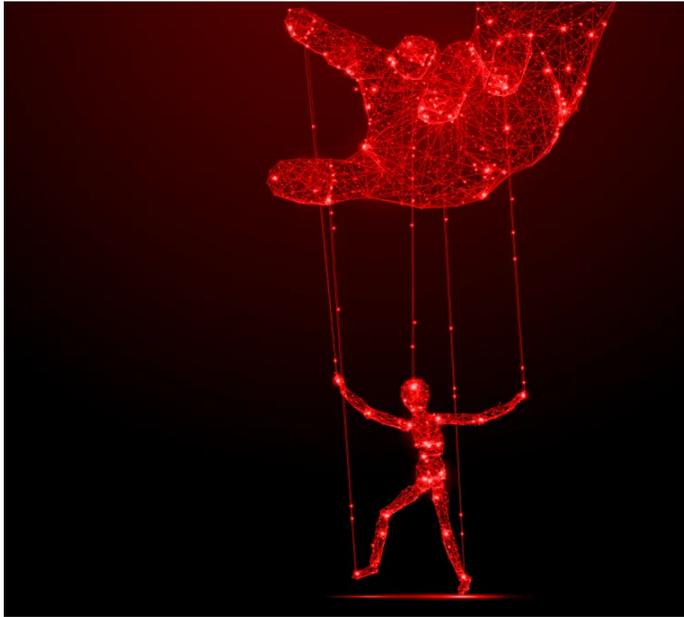
Although the PRC has since conceded the virus poses a significant risk to humans and has a high likelihood of spreading via standard human-to-human transmission, it has continued to suppress the number of COVID-19 deaths in the city of Wuhan and across China. As of July 27, 2020, officials in Wuhan reported 85,921 residents had tested positive for COVID-19 and [4,653](#) people had died from the virus in Hubei province. At the time of writing this, the U.S. reported over 4.1 million people have tested positive for COVID-19 with over [146,000](#) confirmed deaths. In New York City alone, over 228,445 people have tested positive with more than [23,000 deaths](#). Given the population size and density of Wuhan (11 Million) and New York City (8.4 Million), it seems improbable that with a comparable timeline, Wuhan would have only one-fifth the deaths of New York City.

The decision to suppress the number of cases of COVID-19 is likely connected to a larger strategy within the PRC's IW campaign. Throughout the global pandemic, the PRC has consistently attempted to showcase itself as the model country for preventative measures by highlighting the quick and drastic actions it took to handle the virus. News organizations and social media posts began circulating in late January about China creating multiple hospital wings in Wuhan within a [matter of days](#). The PRC also highlighted it was forcing its citizens to adhere to [strict quarantine regulations](#). There were

even reports of the PRC [welding citizens](#) in their apartment buildings to ensure they would not be able to [spread the virus](#). Although the PRC has historically demonstrated its ability to [control information](#) going in and out of China, the PRC made little attempt to control information regarding this draconian quarantine measure thus feeding the narrative the PRC was attempting to shape. This evidence made it easier for them to defend their low mortality rate numbers and highlight the superiority of the PRC's response to the virus.

Despite the PRC's attempt to control the narrative, the international community began to openly criticize China and doubt the validity of the data released. Reports of trucks delivering thousands of [urns](#) per day in Wuhan, crematoriums unable to keep up with the demand necessary to discard the bodies, and [Wuhan citizens](#) beginning to speak up against the PRC's claim of a low mortality rate contributed evidence to counter their claims and helped expose the PRC's IW Campaign.

With increased pressure from the international community and from activists within its own country, the PRC finally revised its total number of COVID-19 cases by [increasing its death toll exactly 50%](#) and adding 1,290 fatalities on April 16, 2020. However, the confusion sown by the suppression efforts had done its damage, leaving the international community misinformed on the severity of the virus and therefore undermining preparation efforts.



Creating Disinformation

Since the beginning of COVID-19, several false narratives continue to flood the IE. While the origins of these false narratives are difficult to determine, the PRC has amplified the narratives that serve their interests. These include but are not limited to: a) COVID-19 was unable to spread via human-to-human contact; b) COVID-19 was no more dangerous than seasonal influenza; and c) the U.S. military was responsible for the pandemic.

a. The “It Can’t Spread” Narrative

Evidence indicates COVID-19 was spreading via person-to-person contact as early as December 1, 2019, when a patient from Wuhan fell ill from viral pneumonia symptoms who had not previously visited the [South China seafood market](#) where the virus is reported to have originated. The first reported case from the PRC to the WHO of human-to-human transmission of COVID-19 was on January 22, 2020. However, almost one month earlier, on [December 25, 2019](#), Chinese medical staff in two separate hospitals in Wuhan were suspected of contracting a viral pneumonia disease and were quarantined as a result.

On December 27, 2019, [Dr. Zhang Jixian](#) reported a family cluster of cases to her superiors indicating the virus was spreading via person-to-person because, “it is unlikely that all three members of a family caught the same disease at the same time unless it is an infectious disease.” On December 30, 2019, several Chinese physicians reported to their superiors that a potentially infectious disease was emerging out of Wuhan with some claiming it bore resemblance to SARS, which is typically [highly contagious](#). When these physicians brought up their concerns, the Wuhan Public Security Bureau, a [state-run institution](#), issued a statement that these were wild allegations and the individuals would be reprimanded for spreading [false rumors](#). On [January 11, 2020](#), more than 700 people including 419 medical staff were forced to undergo medical observation. Despite the evidence above, the Wuhan City Health Commission declared that most of these unexplained viral pneumonia cases had a history of exposure to the [South China seafood market](#) and posed no evidence of human-to-human transmission.

With little contrary evidence to show otherwise, due at least in part to the PRC suppressing information, on January 14, 2020, the [WHO announced](#) “preliminary investigations conducted by the Chinese authorities found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) identified in Wuhan, China”. Had the WHO known that in [early December](#) that multiple Chinese doctors had reported patients with COVID-19 like symptoms—with [no exposure](#) to the South China seafood market—it is possible that they would have issued appropriate guidance that could have slowed the spread of the virus and saved lives.

b. The “It’s Just a Flu” Narrative

The emergence of the narrative that COVID-19 was no more dangerous than the flu can be traced back to [early January](#).

Social media posts began to emerge downplaying the seriousness of the new threat by relating it to seasonal influenza and emphasizing that the traditional flu is deadlier than COVID-19. Social Media trends analysis indicates this narrative increased in popularity for more than 30 days before losing traction.

First emerging via Twitter posts from legitimate handles, the narrative was subsequently picked up and propagated widely via bot-like behavior. Although these accounts cannot be traced to any specific adversaries, they do follow the same [tactics of the PRC](#) and other state-sponsored actors.^[3] During this time, Chinese state media outlets ran pieces discussing the current U.S. flu season, portraying it as a parallel and [comparable epidemic](#). [Foreign Ministry](#) officials used available opportunities to cite U.S. seasonal flu numbers as a counter to criticism over the PRC's handling of the situation.

The core of the PRC's push to downplay the coronavirus as the flu lay in circulating disinformation about the [2009 H1N1 outbreak](#). On February 8, 2020, Chinese officials began to propagate misleading statistics encouraging people to make false comparisons between COVID-19 and what the PRC referred to as the "2009 American Swine Flu Pandemic", which did not originate in the U.S.

c. U.S. Biological Weapon Narrative

As the original disinformation campaign fell apart and the dangers of COVID-19 became increasingly visible to the world, the PRC shifted the disinformation away from narratives downplaying the dangers of the virus to false narratives regarding the virus' origin. The main goal of this shift was to limit the negative perceptions of China and shift blame to her strategic competitors. The central narrative under this theme was that the U.S. was responsible for the virus.

On February 23, 2020, the *People's Daily*, a [PRC official state newspaper](#), reprinted a Global Times article in their English language newspaper titled "Japanese TV report sparks speculations in China that COVID-19 may have [originated in the U.S.](#)". The original *Global Times* article, which is no longer available online, associated the U.S. seasonal influenza deaths with the novel coronavirus, causing speculation that COVID-19 originated in the U.S. Additionally, the PRC amplified these articles and social media posts alleging the virus was a [result of the U.S.](#) Government's incompetence.

At a press conference on February 27, 2020, a Chinese Doctor, Zhong Nanshan, stated that the virus "may not have originated in China." Soon after, numerous Chinese politicians began what appeared to be a coordinated information campaign to [spread this narrative](#), with several tweeting similar statements questioning the origin of the virus. On March 8, 2020, the [Chinese ambassador](#) to South Africa tweeted that, "Although the epidemic first broke out in China, it did not necessarily mean that the virus originated from China, let alone 'made in China.'" South Africa is a key member of China's Belt and Road initiative and it was in China's best interest to shift blame to the U.S. to ensure that its investments across the world and in South Africa were protected. On April 8, 2020, South Africa's president [Cyril Ramaphosa](#), expressed "gratitude to China for its long-term support to South Africa and African countries", a significant indicator of the success of this campaign.

On March 4, 2020, a Canadian-based [conspiracy website](#), whose anti-NATO and U.S. articles are [amplified by Russian](#) and Iranian state media, GlobalResearch.ca, published a piece based on the *People's Daily* reprint entitled, "China's Coronavirus: A Shocking Update. Did the Virus Originate in the U.S.?" Mirroring amplification techniques used by Russia and Iran, on March 13, 2020, [Zhao Lijian](#), the Deputy Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs information

department, included a link in his tweet to this article suggesting the U.S. Army brought the virus into Wuhan via the Military World Games. The original report is no longer available on GlobalResearch.ca's website; however, the site has continued to produce articles alleging the virus was created and originated in the U.S.

In addition to gaining traction in traditional media, the false narrative that COVID-19 originated in the U.S began to trend on social media sites. Facebook and Twitter saw growth in posts asserting that the virus may have been a funded U.S. biological weapon. As of April 28, 2020, hashtags on Twitter such as "USbioweapon", "biologicalwarfare", "Trumpvirus", and various others, are still active on the platform. On YouTube, as of March 22, 2020, when searching for "新冠病毒" (novel coronavirus) the second autocomplete search suggestion was: "The novel coronavirus is an [American genetic weapon](#)". When conducting a [Google Trends analysis](#), one can find that these narratives are still highly prevalent today with individuals from countries around the world searching whether the virus is a result of malfeasance on the part of the U.S., an indication of the success of the [disinformation campaign](#).

The Cost of Information Warfare

Just like physical warfare, IW can carry significant costs for those it is waged against. The consequences of the PRC's IW campaign are still emerging, and the true costs won't be known for a long time. The PRC's decision to ignore its health experts and intentionally suppress information regarding the dangers of the virus enabled the virus to spread uncontrollably across the globe. The successful suppression campaign conducted by the PRC deprived the WHO and other world leaders of vital evidence. This led to an inaccurate understanding of the threat of COVID-19, leaving many governments unprepared for the upcoming challenges.

At the very least, this IW campaign is a contributing factor to the loss of hundreds of thousands of American citizens and hundreds of thousands of lives [across the globe](#).

The global economic costs of COVID-19 are also still emerging and appear equally as significant. When the PRC finally imposed travel restrictions, countries throughout Asia had already begun to see COVID-19 cases rise. The impact of COVID-19 caused foreign investors to pull \$26 billion out of developing Asian economies, increasing concerns of a major economic recession in Asia. Current estimates also indicate that 29 million people in Latin America could fall into poverty, while the Eurozone economy contracted by [3.8%](#), the largest quarterly decline since tracking began in 1995. In the U.S., as of July 27, 2020, [31 million Americans](#) filed for unemployment insurance, raising the prospect of a [deep economic recession](#).

Multiple disinformation narratives, spread and amplified by the PRC, and potentially other near-peer rivals, continue to cause widespread confusion in the IE. On March 5, 2020, the WHO announced the widespread of false information resulted in an [“infodemic”](#), making it increasingly difficult for individuals to find reliable information surrounding COVID-19. This [“infodemic”](#) can be seen in the high percentage of people across the globe that do not see COVID-19 as a significant threat. As of this writing, more than [38% of U.S. citizens](#) believe that COVID-19 does not pose a significant threat to them. Although information companies, U.S. officials, and health experts have all tried to correct these false narratives, efforts thus far have been [ineffective](#).

Even those who do take the threat of the virus seriously are left with a [flood of disinformation](#) to determine how they will react to this invisible enemy. [Conspiracy theories](#) and ineffective preventative measures that could increase the spread of the virus all work to discredit the USG's response to the pandemic.

The cost of this disinformation is widespread as limited government resources must now be directed towards countering false narratives and educating the public rather than combating the virus and its effects.

Why the U.S. Is Unable to Compete in the IE

If the Department of Defense has recognized the need to increase IW capabilities why are we still incapable of countering complex IW campaigns such as the one highlighted with regards to China and COVID-19? It seems that this inability centers on the fact that U.S. capabilities to compete in the IE are spread across numerous entities, caused by an insufficient structure, preventing the U.S. from conducting a whole of government response. While there are many different organizations across multiple U.S. Government agencies with messaging capabilities and missions, the lack of centralized and coordinated shaping-and-influence efforts results in a dispersed capability with various entities constrained by resourcing, authority concerns and a cohesive narrative, preventing them from effectively engaging and protecting U.S. interests. These limitations leave the U.S. unable to provide a real-time, whole-of-government approach to address adversary shaping-and-influence campaigns or the capability to properly shape the IE in its favor.

In order to show why this is the case, it is helpful to look at the three most likely U.S. entities with capabilities to compete against adversary information warfare campaigns: 1) an independent U.S. government agency, the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM); 2) the Department of Defense (DoD); and, 3) the Department of State (DoS).

U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM)

Countering IW is not a new need for the U.S. Throughout the Cold War, the Soviets continually attempted to [control the IE](#). To counter that challenge, the U.S created the [United States Information Agency \(USIA\)](#) in 1953, and was disbanded in 1999.

With the restructuring came a drastic [cut in resources and mission scope](#). The USAGM now serves as the governing body for all non-military U.S. broadcasting and provides programming in 56 languages. The USAGM mission is to inform, engage and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy, which is effective in shaping different national interests; however, unlike its predecessor the USIA, it is not chartered, funded, equipped, nor does it have the authority to conduct information operations to counter adversarial propaganda and misinformation.

Department of Defense

The DoD has multiple IW capabilities; however, most of these reside within a geographic and functional Combatant Commands (CCMDs). The DoD's only strategic-level IW organization, the Joint Information Operations Warfare Center (JIOWC), is not aligned to a geographic or functional command and is uniquely situated to enable the application of information power within the DoD across the globe. However, the JIOWC in its current alignment under the [CJCS](#), does not have COCOM authority and has no tasking authority over those who do. Further complicating the DoD employment of IW capabilities is the fact that "many of our defense establishment processes presuppose clearly defined states of peace and war."

Although the DoD is the most heavily resourced government entity capable of defending against IW campaigns, these campaigns often occur in the "grey zone" before active hostilities have been declared, limiting the authority of the DoD

to act. When the DoD can act, it is usually under the direction of a geographic or functional command that is limited in scope and potentially aligned to regional rather than national objectives.

Department of State (DoS)

DoS has recognized its need to overcome the challenges created by the abolition of USIA and better compete in the IE. In order to do this, the U.S. Government created the Global Engagement Center (GEC) in March 14, 2016 by executive order. The [GEC's](#) current charter is to “lead, synchronize, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining U.S. security interests”.

Unlike USAGM and DoD, the GEC is tasked with leading and synchronizing U.S. messaging efforts at the national level. The GEC is currently the lead entity for identifying the CCP's misinformation campaign. Despite [the authorities and charter](#) to do so, it has faced numerous challenges, including funding shortfalls, political red tape, and questions regarding its ability to [handle the crisis](#) in front of it. Unlike the USIA which was structured for a whole of government response, the current structure of the GEC is more like a geographic Task Force with limited resources, authorities and capabilities. As the GEC coordinator stated regarding [Information Warfare](#) “this is a long-term challenge”, however, as currently constituted the GEC is unable to meet this long-term challenge.

Overall Assessment

The current structure of government entities with the capabilities to compete in the IE has left the U.S. unable to counter China's active COVID-19 IW campaign. For the U.S. to

successfully compete in the IE, it requires a whole of government approach to rapidly bring significant resources and capabilities to reduce the spread of misinformation and counter adversary tactics that endanger U.S. citizens and its allies. One approach is to reactivate the defunct USIA, reformed for competing in a modern IE, and provide this reactivated organization with similar, if not greater resources and authorities than it had during the Cold War. This organization would include the current USAGM, GEC and would integrate a DoD-level entity. The USIA would be restructured with proper oversight, authorities and tasking ability to ensure U.S. interests are pursued in the IE while combating adversarial efforts.

Conclusion

America's adversaries are currently waging IW against American interests. These efforts have been complex, widespread, and effective. China's uncontested ability to maneuver in the IE has increased the challenge of combating the current global pandemic. China has sown confusion regarding the nature of the COVID-19 threat, attempted to promote their own response while discrediting the response of its competitors, and attempted to cast blame on the U.S. to reduce the negative effects to China's global reputation.

In a whole of government construct that reinstitutes and resources the USIA and with various information capabilities either falling under this organization or directly partnering with it (in the case of the DoD), would vastly increase U.S. abilities to operate in the IE and wage IW. Having an organization such as the USIA proposed in place, with the necessary authorities and resources, could have mitigated the success of China's IW campaign and saved countless U.S. and worldwide lives, reduced worldwide economic impacts, and protected U.S. interests.

Specifically, the proposed USIA would have been able to quickly identify China's attempt to suppress information regarding the transmissibility of COVID-19. This information could then have been used to warn the WHO and the world of the misinformation regarding the severity of the virus. Additionally, the USIA could also have proactively worked to shape the IE and limit the effects on the U.S. and the rest of the world against the spread of false and misleading narratives surrounding the virus emanating from China and other nefarious actors.

Second, as part of an offensive strategic shaping-and-influence campaign, the USIA in partnership with the DoD would have had the ability to expose China's failures to contain the virus. The USIA as proposed could have used various existing capabilities, now reorganized and streamlined, to expose these failures to the rest of the world and increase the cost to China for engaging in this information warfare campaign.

It is important to recognize that while COVID-19 was the example used, these tactics can be, have been, and continue to be applied in order to affect the IE. Adversaries, or potential adversaries, such as Russia and Iran have also engaged in misinformation campaigns aimed at causing confusion and shifting blame in a variety of political, military, or economic situations. Even when the world recovers from COVID-19, the U.S. and its allies are still at risk in the global IE without a whole-of-government approach.

Note from the Authors: While it is highly likely that other U.S. near-peer adversaries conducted IW against U.S. citizens as it relates to COVID-19, the above analysis specifically focuses on the IW campaign that was conducted by the PRC. This product is a part-1 of a larger analysis that aims to identify how the U.S. government can structure itself to fight against adversaries that are capable of complex IW campaigns. The part-2 analysis

will provide in-depth reorganizational structure requirements and is currently undergoing final peer-review prior to being published.

Capt Anthony J. Eastin holds a Masters in International Security and Intelligence Studies from Bellevue University and a Masters in Strategic Public Relations from The George Washington University. As the Deputy Chief for the Information Warfare branch at USAFE/AFAF A39, his role as an Information Operator included characterizing the information environment to understand adversary TTPs, providing CFACC with recommendations on how to operate in the information environment, and paving the way for AF influence operations in Africa. He currently serves as the Intel Flight Commander for the 57th Information Aggressor Squadron where he is the subject matter expert on how adversaries conduct information warfare in the information environment.

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[2] Liu, Jun Feng Guodong. "8 People Were Dealt with in Accordance with the Law Because of Dissemination of False Information about 'Wuhan Viral Pneumonia' on the Internet." China Court, January 1, 2020.

<https://www.chinacourt.org/article/detail/2020/01/id/4753367.shtml>

[1] Copley, Gregory R. "Beijing's 'Unavoidable' War: The 21st Century's Total War Has Begun." *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*, May 6, 2020, 4–9.

[3] Chinese and Russian tactics have been observed using bot accounts on several past disinformation campaigns. In August 2019 Chinese state media created several "official" reports that blamed the CIA for the Hong Kong protests. China-linked social media accounts then flooded the information environment via Facebook and Twitter with thousands of pro-Beijing posts and

targeted advertisements.



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 August 28, 2020 at 1:42 pm

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First off, great piece of work by Capt Eastin and 1Lt Franck! One of my inputs to the authors by which I still stand on the basis of the information they provide, documented chronology of key events, and PRC/PLA doctrine on “non-military warfare,” is that the PRC’s approach and use of misinformation suppressed alarm about/effective response to CV19. This allowed CV19 to spread globally. The strategic reason for doing so was to ensure that not just the PRC, but the whole world, would have to deal with the costs/intrusion/economic impact/medical duress/etc. of CV19. That had the effect of limiting what I term the “relative disadvantage” from CV19 that the PRC would incur in a competitive world. That is, I assert the PRC ensured the spread of CV19 so it would not suffer disproportionate and profound economic impact/costs compared to the rest of the world and global economic competitors. They essentially acted to level the playing field...they acted illegally and immorally to successfully limit or erase their relative disadvantage. I realize this is an explosive claim...I stand by it on the public stage. It is consistent with their doctrine on non-military warfare. Again, fantastic work by two young officers and a great job on calling out needed changes for DoD and the Interagency—great to see quality young officers taking the reins on IW and the need to compete at a higher level of intensity in the IE. Best regards, Jonathan Drummond, Lt Col, USAF (Ret)

 Reply

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