

Chinese Communist Party Information Warfare

US–China Competition during the COVID-19 Pandemic

ERIC CHAN

1ST LT PETER LOFTUS, USAF

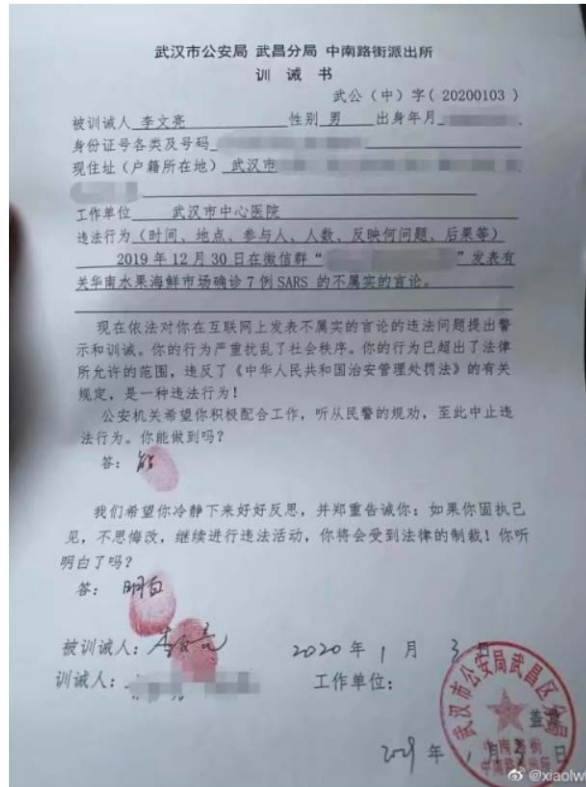
Geopolitics does not stop during a pandemic. In fact, competition between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has accelerated. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is waging an aggressive information warfare campaign to obfuscate its role in propagating the COVID-19 pandemic and to portray its response as a triumph of its authoritarian model of governance. This article will articulate how Beijing is carrying out its information warfare strategy and provide recommendations for how the US can respond.

Background

For the CCP, 2019 was a rough year: a trade war with the United States, massive protests in Hong Kong, the African Swine Flu epidemic, international outcry over internment camps in Xinjiang, and a slowing economy. To cap it off, the greatest challenge to the CCP to date arose in December 2019 from Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province. Wuhan has deep symbolism in modern Chinese history; in 1911, virulent nationalism and imperial mismanagement there was the catalyst for the Wuchang Uprising, which led to the ousting of the last imperial dynasty. Today, Wuhan is the origin of the virulent pneumonia COVID-19, with CCP mismanagement badly damaging perceptions of the Party, with potentially lasting geopolitical repercussions.

As the timeline of the initial spread of COVID became better known, the extent of Party’s cover-up and mismanagement has correspondingly become more evident. In early December 2019, doctors in Wuhan detected the virus; by late December, they were already suspicious that the virus was spreading via human-to-human transmission.¹ On 30 December, Dr. Li Wenliang, a physician at Wuhan Central Hospital, used the Chinese social media platform WeChat to send warning of a “SARS-like” virus to a number of classmates from medical school. Regional Party authorities, upon learning of the warning, did not take steps to probe these medical concerns. Instead, on 3 January, the Wuhan Public Security Bureau detained Dr. Li for “spreading rumors,” forcing him to sign a letter re-

nouncing the medical warning and threatening him with further punishment if he did not remain quiet. Additionally, the local government even ordered the destruction of COVID samples that had been collected.² Wuhan mayor Zhou Xianwang insinuated that he could not share information about the virus earlier because of “regulatory requirements for local governments to seek Beijing’s approval before making such disclosures.”³



(Weibo photo from Dr. Li Wenliang)

Figure 1. The Wuhan Public Security Bureau Warning Letter to Dr. Li Wenliang. On 3 January 2020, the Wuhan Public Security Bureau detained and forced Dr. Li to sign a warning letter. As translated: “According to the law, this letter serves as a warning and reprimand over your illegally spreading untruthful information online. Your action has breached the law, violating the relevant rules in ‘Laws of the People’s Republic of China on Penalties for the Administration of Public Security.’ This is an illegal act! The law enforcement agency wants you to cooperate, listen to the police, and stop your illegal behavior. Can you do that? (Answer: *I can.*) We want you to calm down and reflect on your actions, and solemnly warn you: If you insist on your views, refuse to repent, and continue the illegal activity, you will be punished per the law! Do you hear and understand? (Answer: *I understand.*)

Could faster action have prevented the spread of the virus? According to research from Southampton University, if intervention had occurred one week ear-

lier, the pandemic's toll could have been curtailed by 66 percent; if two weeks earlier, by 86 percent; and if three weeks earlier, by 95 percent.⁴ According to Mayor Zhou, by the time the mass-quarantine was initiated on 23 January, five million people had already left Wuhan.⁵ As of 25 April 2020, 3 million people worldwide have contracted COVID-19, with some 200,000 deaths. The Party turned what could have been a minor regional outbreak into a worldwide pandemic. CCP General Secretary and Chinese President Xi Jinping understood early on that international realization of this would lead to an enormous global backlash—in his first publicized speech to the Politburo Standing Committee on 3 February, he urged the Party to “take the initiative and effectively influence international public opinion.”⁶ In response, the Party has started an integrated global information warfare campaign, which has been unprecedented in scope.

The Structure of CCP Information Warfare

The CCP places a premium on the control of information flow. This was true during the SARS pandemic in 2003, and little has changed since then—except the Party has become far more aggressive in the use of *offensive* information warfare, which is designed to *obfuscate* and *shape a new narrative* versus simply censoring information. Defensively, the CCP continues to use censorship against information detrimental to its image: for instance, after the Chinese media outlet *Caixin* began questioning the official COVID death toll given the number of urns stacked outside of funeral homes, funeral homes were no longer authorized to disclose data.⁷ Similarly, research papers on COVID origins now need to be vetted through the Ministry of Science and Technology prior to publication.⁸ This older method of information control is now complemented by offensive information warfare. In this case, the propaganda apparatus (PRC media such as *Xinhua*, *People's Daily*, *Global Times*, etc.) broadcasts constant messaging both domestically and internationally framing the CCP response as a triumph of its disciplined authoritarian system over the chaotic democratic system of the West. Finally, taking a page from the 2016 Russian disinformation campaign, the PRC has flooded Western social media with false narratives and conspiracy theories to cause societal confusion and discord.

Through analysis of PRC media and CCP proclamations, there are three predominant themes in this offensive information warfare: (1) highlight Xi Jinping's personal leadership, (2) portray China as a responsible great power, and (3) promote anti-US messaging and conspiracy theories.

Theme 1: Highlight Xi Jinping's personal leadership

In early January, as the virus rapidly spread through Wuhan, CCP central leadership fell uncharacteristically silent as local authorities struggled to contain the infections and censor the populace. The first references to General Secretary Xi's involvement came on 20 January, when *Xinhua* released a short news statement that Xi had "ordered resolute efforts to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus."⁹ By this time, *Xinhua* noted, the virus had already gone regional, with cases appearing in Thailand, Japan, and Korea.

It was not until almost a month later, on 15 February, that the official Party magazine *Qiushi* ("Seeking Truth") finally published direct quotes from Xi: a speech he had reportedly given two weeks earlier to the Politburo Standing Committee, referenced above. Xi stated that while he had put forth "requirements for the prevention and control of the new coronavirus," the crisis had worsened due to "poor public health management" from *regional* Party officials, accusing them of "bureaucratic formalism" and "failure to implement central leadership directives."¹⁰ Xi then made an example of some of these officials: the Communist Party leaders of Wuhan and of Hubei province were both fired and replaced with Xi loyalists. The Party took similar action in the case of Dr. Li Wenliang. With public sentiment in Wuhan simmering over Li's death on 7 February from COVID, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the Party's top disciplinary body, had the Wuhan Public Security Bureau revoke Li's earlier censure, punished two low-level police officers, and had the Bureau publicly apologize to Dr. Li's family. Finally, Dr. Li was given the title of *martyr*, the highest honor the Party grants to civilians, and lauded in propaganda as a loyal member of the Party and a *nationally advanced individual resolutely implementing General Secretary Xi's instructions*.¹¹

By early March, as cases in Wuhan began to plateau, the tenor of the propaganda changed. Instead of deflection, PRC media now declared that the abatement of COVID in Wuhan was a testament to General Secretary Xi's leadership. On 10 March, Xi landed in Wuhan, beginning a weeklong media showcase of him thanking frontline medical workers, conducting a "work inspection" of a local hospital, sitting down with shop owners, and walking through a neighborhood waving at residents.

Xi leads people's war on epidemic

(China Daily) 09:08, March 12, 2020

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President Xi Jinping inquires about purchasing and supply of people's daily necessities at a community in Wuhan, March 10, 2020. (Xinhua/Xie Huanchi)

Response not only protected Chinese, also impeded global spread of illness

(Screenshot from Xinhua)

Figure 2. People's Daily depiction of Xi's visit to a Wuhan market. On 10 March 2020, CCP General Secretary and PRC President Xi Jinping visited Wuhan, COVID-19's outbreak origin. The visit was designed to be a media showcase demonstrating Xi's leadership and control over all aspects of the crisis, from medical research to hospital operations to food supply. Note the early use of the now-standard CCP propaganda line about how the PRC response bought the world time to prepare for the pandemic.

Xi then foreshadowed the upcoming international propaganda campaign by saying that the success demonstrated the "distinct political character and advantage" of the PRC system.¹²

Theme 2: Portray China as a responsible great power

By mid-March, Xi had the Party propaganda apparatus shift to international information operations following the passing of the immediate crisis in Wuhan. These operations have been a whole-of-nation effort to create a well-publicized display of generous foreign aid and medical competence.

One example of this is the media coverage surrounding the COVID donations of Party member Jack Ma, the founder of Alibaba. On 16 March, Ma announced that his foundation would send 500,000 testing kits and one million masks to the United States,¹³ as well as 20,000 testing kits, 100,000 masks, and 1,000 sets of personal protective equipment to all 54 African countries.¹⁴ In PRC media, ostensibly private donations are framed as having been *coordinated through the Party and government*. Depending on China's specific relationship with the respective country, *China's donation* will be portrayed as being that of an *iron-clad friendship/all-weather friend* (Cambodia, Serbia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Zimbabwe),¹⁵ or alternatively, a symbol of *the desire to jointly build a community with a shared future* (United States, Japan, South Korea).¹⁶ Finally, the article/media presentation will usually end with a quote from a local dignitary exhorting the international community to thank China—with extra media space if the dignitary makes a favorable comparison between China and the West.

One of the most prominent demonstrations of this was when Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić, on 15 March, remarked that “European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairy tale,” and that the “only country that can help us is China.”¹⁷ This was given significant media attention both inside China and in PRC international media, with a number of articles released during this time quoting “European experts” as being grateful to China for assistance while dismissing the European Union or the United States.¹⁸



(Twitter photo from @Serdjosega)

Figure 3. Progovernment tabloid billboard in the center of Belgrade, Serbia. A few days after President Aleksander Vučić blasted the EU and appealed to China for support on 15 March 2020, billboards and banners praising Xi Jinping were placed on the streets of Belgrade. “Thank you, Big Brother Xi.” This banner was featured prominently in PRC media along with pictures of the Serbian president kissing the Chinese flag against the backdrop of a PRC plane carrying medical cargo.

Direct PRC government aid is also heavy on symbolism, serving to highlight existing CCP political-economic international initiatives with a COVID twist. On 21 March, PRC media heavily covered a train loaded with 110,000 masks and 776 protective suites from the industrial city of Yiwu in Zhejiang province, to Madrid, Spain—a journey of over 6,200 miles/13,000 km, which took the train 17 days to cover.¹⁹ Despite the obvious disadvantages of train transport in delivering urgently needed medical supplies, the reason for both the train usage and route was to highlight the CCP's New Silk Road political-economic megaproject (the “Belt” of the more widely known Belt and Road Initiative [BRI]).

Similarly, the CCP has used COVID aid to revive a previously moribund initiative, the Health Silk Road. This was an initiative that Xi first raised in 2017 as an addendum to the New Silk Road project; after getting the World Health Organization (WHO) to sign a memorandum of understanding to commit to its construction in January 2017, Xi then had the current WHO Director-General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom, promote the initiative as “visionary” during his visit to Beijing in August 2017. Afterward, it was little discussed for several years. However, on 16 March 2020, during a phone conversation with Italian prime minister Giuseppe Conte, Xi promised Conte medical teams, supplies, and assistance in building the Health Silk Road. Xi brought up the initiative with Conte for a reason; in March 2019, Conte had been the first European leader to join China's BRI.

Theme 3: Promote anti-US messaging and conspiracy theories

The CCP has not been content with simply promoting its international medical aid. Instead, the Party has also taken the opportunity to vastly expand negative media coverage of the US response to the crisis and Washington's ability to lead. Furthermore, the CCP has integrated Russian disinformation tactics into its already robust Internet information warfare apparatus to spread conspiracy theories and disinformation on US social media.

Anti-US messaging is promoted in several ways. The first is through “official” channels, such as speeches/pronouncements/interviews with PRC government officials, printed in PRC flagship media like *People's Daily* or *Xinhua*. The higher ranking the PRC government official involved, the more these pronouncements are reliant on misdirection or euphemisms, for a sheen of professionalism. For instance, following French president Emmanuel Macron's 22 April declination to join in the Australia/US call for an international probe into the origins and spread of COVID, PRC foreign minister Wang Yi praised France for its “independent diplomatic style, especially its adherence to multilateralism.” This was duly published in *Xinhua*.²⁰ Australia, on the other hand, was attacked as being “keen to parrot” the Americans—by an unnamed spokesperson at the PRC Embassy in

Canberra, in response to a question by the ultranationalist PRC tabloid *The Global Times* (which itself is a subsidiary to the “more respectable” *People’s Daily*).

This differentiation is even more apparent in anti-US messaging spread through “unofficial” channels, where there is a level of plausible deniability. The most notable example of this is the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ spokesman Zhao Lijian’s conspiratorial Twitter post on 12 March, blaming the US Army for deliberately spreading COVID in Wuhan; this accusation was then shared by over a dozen Chinese diplomats on Twitter.²¹



(Twitter, @zlj517)

Figure 4. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ spokesman Zhao Lijian Twitter post, 12 March 2020. The CCP use of “unofficial” channels (Twitter is blocked in China) to spread conspiracy theories is complemented by “official” channels using more “reasonable” disinformation. Note Zhao’s use of the *Global Times* tabloid media.

The “official” PRC response following the widespread international backlash over Zhao’s tweet is a demonstration of the complementary nature of the official–unofficial spread of disinformation. On 22 March, PRC Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai gave an interview to *Axios* in which he stated in re-

sponse: “Eventually, we must have an answer to where the virus originally came. But, this is the job for scientists to do, not for diplomats, not for journalists to speculate, because such speculation will help nobody.”²² While this was widely reported in Western media as a rebuke to Zhao, this was actually the use of an official channel to spread a “reasonable” alternative to the easily laughed-off conspiracy theory: obfuscation under the guise of scientific uncertainty.

Furthermore, the PRC has also deployed Russian-style disinformation techniques—social media bot spam—to insert false narratives and increase discord in US society. *Pro Publica*, an investigative news organization, recorded a recent uptick in the number of pro-CCP accounts exclusively focused on criticizing the United States. Their report tracked over 10,000 such accounts, and mapped how these suspect users interacted with one another to advance PRC narratives.²³ One technique involves using “bespoke” social media accounts—an account with the features of a real social media profile, such as a long account history, regular posts, direct messaging—to post an “eye-catching” comment, which would then be boosted via likes, retweets, and pasted comments by spam accounts to game platform algorithms for promotion.

In mid-March, the United States received an indication of the power of these amplification techniques during a pandemic. Chinese operatives, via Twitter, Facebook, and text messaging, pushed a false narrative that the United States was about to go into national lockdown, to be enforced by the Department of Homeland Security and the military. Per the *New York Times*, “The messages became so widespread over 48 hours that the White House’s National Security Council issued an announcement via Twitter that they were ‘FAKE.’”²⁴ This type of panic mongering represents a more aggressive use of disinformation and deflection than the standard PRC *50 Cent Army* method of blanketing US social media networks with stilted CCP propaganda on perceived “anti-CCP” topics. In this case, causing general mayhem was the goal, and by itself is a troubling indication of the PRC escalation of information warfare.

Responding to the Challenge

As the PRC has chosen to embark on an escalatory global information warfare campaign during the most serious pandemic in a hundred years, the United States must respond accordingly. We propose three national-level responses to seize the initiative in the US–PRC great-power competition and pressure the CCP into ceasing escalation in the information domain.

Create a Twenty-first-Century Arsenal of Democracy

Washington should expedite the transition of our nation's manufacturing capacity toward producing medical equipment on a truly massive scale, to supply not just the United States but also our allies, partners, and our would-be allies/partners in a Twenty-first-century Arsenal of Democracy. It has become clear that having an enormous portion of the global medical supply chain in the PRC is an invitation for the CCP to promote its political-economic objectives in the name of medical aid. Worse yet, it has allowed the CCP to openly threaten the United States by imposing pharmaceutical export controls and thus plunge America into a "mighty sea of coronavirus."²⁵ We can only protect ourselves and our friends against this type of pressure with the creation of a strategic reserve of medical supplies.

Collaborate with allies and partners to counter Beijing's narrative

The CCP is now openly advocating for the superiority of their authoritarian system. This is a significant change from past propaganda, which narrowly advocated the Party's leadership and system being appropriate for China itself (i.e., the 1980s-era Deng Xiaoping motto, "*Socialism with Chinese characteristics.*") This is not something that is a threat to the United States alone: the CCP is now targeting the EU with propaganda about the inefficiency of democratic countries. In France, the PRC embassy posted an article stating that in Western countries, careworkers in nursing homes abandoned their jobs and left residents to die.²⁶ Against this systematic challenge, backed by PRC economic pressure, individual efforts are insufficient. For instance, an EU report documenting PRC disinformation was delayed and then heavily watered down following pressure from Beijing.²⁷ The United States must work with fellow democracies to push back against this pressure and, more fundamentally, against the myth of efficient autocracies. This means highlighting successful cases of democratic countries dealing with the virus, such as South Korea or Taiwan. This means placing economic pressure on the PRC when the PRC tries to impose economic pressure to enforce their political will. This means actively demonstrating how autocratic systems break down the transparent information transfer that is critical to stopping the virus. Dr. Li Wenliang did not die *for* the Party; he died *because of* the Party.

Reinvigorate US leadership of international organizations

By now, the failure of the WHO to adequately check the claims of the CCP in January 2020—the most critical point in the shift from regional outbreak to global pandemic—is now clear. In mid-January, the WHO declared that there was "no evidence of human-to-human transmission of the virus," even while doctors in

China were being warned against spreading “rumors” to that effect. The WHO director-general, on 28 January, *praised* China for “setting a new standard for outbreak response.”²⁸ The co-opting effects of the PRC on international organizations, even while PRC funding for these international organizations is a mere fraction of the US level, demonstrates the degree to which US influence in these international organizations has atrophied. The United States must once again regain its leadership mantle at these organizations, because we have now seen the *national*-level effects of neglect. This does not necessarily mean more funding. This means using what funding we do provide to greater effect; working with allies and partners to confront PRC propaganda at every step, vice dismissing it. This means shoring up fellow democratic partners such as Taiwan in these international organizations: Taiwan’s response to COVID has been exemplary, with the free flow of information and deft use of technology not to deceive, but to empower its citizens. This would be the type of expertise that the WHO should welcome, instead of the deceptions of the CCP.

Conclusion

CCP COVID propaganda states that the virus is our common enemy and that nothing is more important than life. It is clear from the early handling of COVID-19 that the Party views anything that threatens the system is our common enemy, and that the Party’s grip on power is more important than life. This is true not only for the PRC’s own citizens but also for the rest of the world.

The repercussions of this realization by the international community has led Xi Jinping to take great risks in an escalation of information warfare. The propaganda has changed. The method of execution has changed. The days of a cautious CCP are over. Through this disinformation campaign, the PRC has demonstrated its intent to be an aggressive, revisionist power. We must clearly contest China’s manipulative narrative, but simple rhetoric is not enough. We must revitalize American leadership by placing our strengths at the fore: our economy, our relationships with our allies, and our ability to lead. There is more than American power at stake; American values are threatened as well. Much like a virus, values can spread, and the CCP is doing its best to propagate the Party’s values. Just as we rise to the COVID challenge, so must we rise to the CCP’s challenge. ✪

Eric Chan

Eric Chan is an airpower strategist for HAF/A3K Checkmate, specializing in Chinese and Korean political-security affairs. His articles have been previously published in *The Diplomat* ("Fifth Column Fears: The Chinese Influence Campaign in the United States") and *War on the Rocks* ("What to Expect When You're Expecting the PLA"). Mr. Chan was previously China, Korea, Philippines, and Vietnam Country Director in SAF/IA, responsible for Foreign Military Sales to US partners and for engagement with the Chinese Air Force.

1st Lieutenant Peter Loftus

1st Lt Peter Loftus is a USAF officer with the 75th Fighter Squadron. He holds a bachelor's degree in Chinese language and literature from the University of Massachusetts–Amherst and a master's in international relations from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), where he concentrated in China studies and international economics. He spent two years living in China between Beijing and Shanghai (Project Global Officer), Xi'an (Fulbright-Hays grant), and Nanjing (Hopkins-Nanjing Center). He is a member of the Language Enabled Airman Program for Mandarin.

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