

SPECIAL REPORT

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KATHRYN AND SHELBY CULLOM DAVIS INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY AND FOREIGN POLICY

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# The Axis of Disruption

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**T**he United States and its European allies have separately concluded that the COVID-19 disinformation campaigns of China, Russia, and Iran have reached, in the words of an EU report, a “trilateral convergence.” The three governments have used the pandemic to launch a disinformation campaign against the United States, Europe, and other countries at a time when the public health and economies of the world are most vulnerable to the spread of false information. While the three governments first used the pandemic to launch a disinformation campaign against the United States, Europe, and other countries, they then used the riots that shook American cities following the death of George Floyd to sow divisive content that often also relied on disinformation. The responses of the United States, Europe, Japan, Australia, and the other free democracies must be resolute, coordinated when possible, and encompass the private sector, but also respect and protect the civil liberties that link the democracies together.

China, Russia, and Iran possess models of government that are exportable only in the eyes of national ideological minorities that desire to rule entire countries without seeking periodically the consent of those they would govern. In Russia and Iran the rulers achieve this by conducting basically rigged “elections.” Would-be one-party rulers, ambitious kleptocrats, and aspiring theocrats may regard the systems in Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran with wistful admiration, but these models contain obvious limitations for those who believe that the people are the best judge of what is good for them.

To export their models—the better to maintain power at home—these three governments must create the impression that their different templates of autocracy can deal better with challenges, large and small, than liberal democracy with its messy give and take, checks on power, and the

## TEXT BOX 1

**Terminology**

Before describing what has transpired, it is important to be precise about the terms that will be used. Although misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda are sometimes used interchangeably, they have different definitions. All three deal with the propagation of information, and the first two refer specifically to wrong information.

Merriam-Webster.com describes *misinformation* as “incorrect or misleading information,” and *disinformation* as “false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.” Two of the three entries under *propaganda* are “the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person” and “ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one’s cause or to damage an opposing cause.” (The third entry is a congregation of the Roman Curia.)<sup>1</sup>

The difference between misinformation and disinformation is therefore intent, which is admittedly sometimes hard to ascertain. Disinformation is the *intentional* spread of information known to be false. Propaganda is simply the propagation of any information, true or false, usually by a state actor. Disinformation, therefore, is “fake news” that its propagator knows to be fake.

In this report, we deal only with disinformation, the intentional spread of clear lies by China, Russia, and Iran to gain strategic advantage. We also limit ourselves to clear disinformation efforts related to COVID-19. China’s ongoing and heavy-handed manipulation of Hollywood studios, colleges, and universities, which we have chronicled for years,<sup>2</sup> is outside the remit of this report. Ditto for Russia’s general efforts to interfere in the U.S. electoral system.

1. Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, “disinformation,” “misinformation,” and “propaganda,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/> (accessed September 11, 2020).
2. Mike Gonzalez, “China’s Public Opinion Warfare: How Our Culture Industry Learned to Stop Worrying and Love China,” Heritage Foundation Special Report No. 2986, February 5, 2015, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/chinas-public-opinion-warfare-how-our-culture-industry-learned-stop-worrying-and-love>.

need for transparency, accountability, compromise, and cooperation. If they can create the impression that the Russian, Chinese, or Iranian models can better provide economic growth, efficiency, stability, national unity, and respect for national traditions or religious beliefs, and that in exchange people will assent to some degree of despotism and forgo free elections, then Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran will have achieved their domestic and international goals.

The COVID-19 crisis that has paralyzed the globe has provided the autocratic troika with an extraordinary opportunity to wreak havoc. All three governments clearly mishandled the crisis, making exporting the deception overseas an existential need in the eyes of Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. In the case of China, so many Chinese, especially the young, pushed back “on the government’s efforts to conceal its missteps and its resistance to allowing civil society to help”

that the authorities resorted to punishing critics and whistleblowers.<sup>1</sup> One added reason for Beijing’s defensive behavior is that COVID-19 originated in the central Chinese city of Wuhan. While it is widely reported that the virus can be traced to a wet market<sup>2</sup> where live bats were sold for human consumption—the idea is that the virus jumped from a bat or another animal who ate a bat to humans—the U.S. government has confirmed that it is probing the possibility that the virus escaped a lab in that city.<sup>3</sup> Russia’s response has also been beset with mismanagement and secrecy.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the mullahs who rule Iran were dishonest in reporting the extent of the disease inside the Islamic Republic, as well-sourced journalists such as the *Atlantic’s* Graeme Wood attested.<sup>5</sup>

## Disinformation Campaigns

Russia, China, and Iran have each engaged in COVID-19 disinformation.

**China.** Since China was the lead country with the virus, it was also the first to engage in information warfare. Its first deception was to deny the existence of person-to-person transmission. As the *Wall Street Journal* put it in early March, “Even after Chinese President Xi Jinping personally ordered officials to control the outbreak on Jan. 7, authorities kept denying it could spread between humans—something doctors had known was happening since late December.”<sup>6</sup> In this deceit, Xi curiously even received the support of the World Health Organization (WHO). The WHO, for example, tweeted on January 14:

Preliminary investigations conducted by the Chinese authorities have found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of the novel #coronavirus (2019-nCoV) identified in #Wuhan, #China.<sup>7</sup>

Why did the WHO behave in this manner? Quoting sources at the German Federal Intelligence Services, the usually well-sourced German magazine *Der Spiegel* reported on May 5 that China in January had asked the WHO to “delay a global warning” about the pandemic. Specifically, the magazine quoted the intelligence sources as saying that President Xi in a telephone call on January 21 with Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus urged Tedros to “hold back information about a human-to-human transmission and to delay a pandemic warning.”<sup>8</sup> The WHO has denied the *Der Spiegel* story, but Tedros did undertake a well-publicized trip to Beijing on January 28, where he was photographed with Xi. He showered effusive praise on his government’s commitment to fighting the

virus, especially “the transparency they have demonstrated.”<sup>9</sup> The Trump Administration has frozen payments to the WHO, accusing Tedros of being too solicitous of Beijing.

The evidence, then, is that, as the *Washington Post* said in an editorial in mid-April, China’s “closed, authoritarian government repeatedly deceived and covered up the truth as the virus spread.”<sup>10</sup> Not only did the Chinese government keep the truth from the world, but it also kept the truth from its own citizens. It then began punishing those citizens who revealed the truth about the virus. According to the *China Digital Times*, quoting “statistics gathered by netizens,” in the period “from January 1 to April 4, the national mourning period, there were 484 cases of individuals charged with crimes related to speaking out about the coronavirus.”<sup>11</sup> The most famous case was the silencing of Dr. Li Wenliang, the Wuhan doctor who wrote on the platform WeChat back in December about the nature of the virus and was immediately silenced by the police.<sup>12</sup> Li died from the disease in early February.

China was not content to conceal the truth about the pandemic and to persecute those who discussed it publicly. It aggressively promoted what it knew to be falsehoods. The best known example is that of the Foreign Ministry Spokesman Zhao Lijian, who around March began to spread the conspiracy theory that the virus had originated in the U.S. On March 3, Zhao sent the following tweet:

CDC was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!<sup>13</sup>

As Heritage’s Dean Cheng put it, “Zhao’s tweet and its reference to a conspiracy theory suggesting that the disease might have been deliberately spread by the US military, aroused a major global reaction, as media worldwide discussed it.” And Zhao’s use of Twitter is “ironic, since the average Chinese person cannot have a Twitter account.”<sup>14</sup> Of course, China’s disinformation campaign was not limited to government spokesmen. The *Daily Telegraph* and other outlets have reported on how China has flooded social media with ads blaming the pandemic on President Donald Trump. It was, said the *Telegraph*, a “worldwide propaganda campaign, coordinated across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and traditional media, attempting to depict China as a global leader in the fight against Covid-19 and drown out accusations that it made the crisis worse by trying to cover up its own outbreak.”<sup>15</sup>

In its efforts to silence critics and deflect from its misdeeds, China was aided by the fact that the U.S. is an open society, whose internal fissures are openly discussed. Thus, Beijing was able, for example, to allege racism as the motivation for U.S. criticism of its handling of the crisis. A non-published report by the EU's External Action Service said, "Conspiracies explicitly linking Sinophobic sentiment and COVID-19 are surfacing on other social media platforms as well, such as Twitter and Reddit, suggesting that weaponised information moves from marginal into mainstream communities."<sup>16</sup>

When it expelled three *Wall Street Journal* news reporters earlier in 2020, supposedly in retaliation for an op-ed on the editorial pages—which are run independently from the news side of the paper—that called China "The Sick Man of Asia," it justified its actions on the supposedly racist nature of the phrase. U.S. internal rifts played right into Beijing's hands.

The Xinhua News Agency cited directly the domestic U.S. debate:

Quoting Catherine Ceniza Choy, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of California, Berkeley, NBC News reported that the "racist association of Chinese bodies as disease carriers" has roots in white supremacist and nativist fears of Asian migration in the late 19th century.

*The Washington Post* reported that "Anti-Chinese racism always hinged on the belief that Asians harbor disease. In the 19th century, China was referred to as 'the sick man of Asia.'"<sup>17</sup>

China deceived the world because it is intent on demonstrating to its people and the world that its authoritarian system is superior to the democratic system. Typical of its attitude was an opinion piece in the state-owned *Global Times* on February 26, 2020, which described how the exigencies of the democratic system rendered reactions to the pandemic ineffective. Lest anyone miss the point, the article was titled "US political system stymies effective virus response." It said that "China has acted as a responsible big country, timely sharing information with the World Health Organization and other countries and providing precious knowledge for them in epidemic prevention and control." In the U.S., however, people's perceptions of China as an adversary "affect the attitude of senators in the electoral districts which they represent. Hence, a public health emergency could eventually turn into a political game.... Such a dilemma once again reflects the flaws in US governance system, which is not capable of giving a timely and effective response to the COVID-19."<sup>18</sup> Democracies, China is saying, produce inferior governance.

The deception became so heavy-handed that it backfired sometimes. A book by the Central Publicity Department and State Council Information Office titled *A Great Power's Battle with an Epidemic* attempted to demonstrate “the remarkable superiority of the Chinese political system under the leadership of the Communist Party,” according to the *Washington Post*. The book had to be pulled off the major book platforms, “apparently due to the significant negative online reactions to the premature celebration of victory and unabashed self-aggrandization.”<sup>19</sup>

**Iran.** The Islamic Republic, whose economy is reeling under U.S. sanctions and the drop in crude oil prices, saw the pandemic as an opportunity to force its enemy to lift the sanctions while spreading conspiracy theories that blamed the United States for originating the virus. Its disinformation campaign began pretty much as China's, hiding the extent of the virus spread and concealing the government's incompetence. Just as with China, the Iranian regime sought to spread through social media the idea that Iran's model was superior to the U.S. model in combatting the virus. In his speech to the nation on March 23, the first day of the new Persian year, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei again reminded his audience that a nation is strengthened through travails, not through “self-indulgence and simply seeking comfort.”<sup>20</sup>

Iran, one of the first countries affected by the virus because of its continued scheduled flights to China, first sought to conceal the extent of the virus. According to a State Department factsheet, on February 10, Deputy Health Minister Ali-Reza Raisi told reporters, “I declare that there are no cases of coronavirus in the country and our citizens should only follow news released by the Health Ministry on the coronavirus.”<sup>21</sup> That same day, according to the factsheet, a 63-year-old Iranian woman died from the COVID-19.

Then, Iran saw the pandemic as an opportunity to fulfill a long-term goal: ending the sanctions. In early March, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, in a letter to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, urged that the United States immediately halt its “campaign of economic terrorism” because it made it impossible to import medicine and medical equipment needed to identify and treat COVID-19. “It is imperative that the United Nations and its member states join the Iranian people in demanding that the government of the United States abandon its malign and fruitless approach against Iran,” said the letter.<sup>22</sup>

However, this was untrue, as quickly became clear. When the Trump Administration offered medical aid,<sup>23</sup> the Islamic Republic quickly rebuffed the offer. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said in a March 22 address that he found the offer of aid written in a letter “very surprising.” He then proceeded to use the address to spread conspiracies:

First of all, according to what your own officials have said, you have shortages in trying to prevent this disease, and you also have shortages in medications and in treating this disease. If you have something, use it for your own patients. Secondly, you are accused of having created this virus. I do not know how accurate this claim is, but considering the circumstances that exist, which reasonable individual can trust you? You might give us a medicine that would spread the disease even more or make it last longer. Some people even say that some forms of the virus are particular to Iranian genes and thus produced on the basis of genetic science.<sup>24</sup>

The Iranian spread of disinformation was not limited to pronouncements from the clerics, but found its way into social media. In mid-April the information-flow-analysis company Graphika issued a report detailing how a well-known Iranian influence operator had “responded to the coronavirus pandemic by shifting its messaging to blame the United States and praise the role of China.” The Internet actor International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM) has “reacted to the virus by accusing the United States of creating it and then hindering Iran’s fight against the virus with its sanctions, and by praising the resilience, creativity and unity of the Iranian people and their leaders,” said Graphika’s report.<sup>25</sup> The IUVM operation was limited in its reach because “[o]ver the past few years, social media platforms such as Facebook, Google and Twitter have repeatedly removed IUVM accounts from their platforms for being engaged in pro-Iran information operations and deceiving users, and have continued investigating and disrupting this network.”<sup>26</sup>

IUVM tried to “play up the regime’s success in fighting the virus,” said Graphika, “emphasizing Iran’s effective response and recovery rates, contrasting these with the spread of the disease in the United States, and attacking Trump for his handling of the response.” Graphika said IUVM’s “narrative is best expressed in a series of IUVM Press headlines from February 27 to March 28”:

- “Dozens of Infected Iranians Recover as Coronavirus Outbreak Slows Down” (February 27);
- “California in Dire Need of Corona Kits as Potential Cases Hit 8,400” (February 28);
- “Iran’s Coronavirus Death Toll Hits 34, Officials Say Big Surprise Coming” (February 28; the “Big Surprise” referred to predicted “major advancements in containing the disease”);

- “US Reports New Coronavirus Cases with Unknown Source” (February 29);
- “Iran’s Coronavirus Fight: 978 Cases Confirmed, 175 Patients Recover” (March 1);
- “US in Panic Amid First Coronavirus Death, Countrywide Spread” (March 1);
- “Leader Hails Iran’s Anti-Coronavirus Fight, Says Outbreak Transient” (March 3);
- “White House Trying to Keep Coronavirus Deliberations Secret” (March 12);
- “Leader Warns of Bioterrorism, Orders Iran Military to Enter Coronavirus Fight” (March 13);
- Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif “Says US Bans Hinder Coronavirus
- Fight but Iran Will Prevail” (March 15);
- “Trump’s Strange Behavior in Face of Coronavirus Outbreak” (March 19);
- “Iran Coronavirus Outbreak Will Slow Down in 2–3 Weeks: [Iranian President Hassan] Rouhani” (March 21);
- “US Coronavirus Cases Surpass 100,000 amid Medical Shortages” (March 28); and

**“Rouhani: Iran Fully Ready to Weather COVID-19 Outbreak Despite Sanctions” (March 28).<sup>27</sup>**

Some of these were actually taken from Western media reports, with the headlines slightly tweaked to make the U.S. situation appear worse or more panicky.

**Russia.** Predictably, the Russia government is also a major culprit in spreading disinformation about the coronavirus, fitting in with a decades-long disinformation effort blaming the United States for virus outbreaks

such as AIDS and Ebola. As the COVID-19 caseload in Russia surges, the efforts to undermine the United States and its Western allies have intensified. In doing this, Russia has been echoing many of the themes developed by China, for the same reasons.

For instance, Russia Today (RT), the state-funded international television network and one of President Putin's main vectors for disinformation, has spread the accusation that the U.S. could be the prime culprit behind COVID-19 outbreak. RT has especially broadcast these allegations in China and Iran. In March, RT reported that Major General Hossein Salami, head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, speculated, "It is possible that this virus is a product of a biological attack by America which initially spread to China and then to Iran and the rest of the world."<sup>28</sup> Salami vowed that Iran would "fight" the virus and cautioned that the illness "will return" to the United States, if Washington was indeed responsible for the outbreak. The piece was accompanied by a typical dishonest disclaimer, "Though such conspiracy theories have been circulating for a while, there's still no official proof it could be true."<sup>29</sup>

Another disinformation campaign invented or echoed by Russia has linked the corona virus with 5G technology, allegedly because of its use of a certain frequency. RT, along with the Russian propaganda website Sputnik, started a campaign over a year ago against 5G technology, according to Wired, calling "5G Wireless: A Dangerous 'Experiment on Humanity.'" A YouTube video on this allegation has been viewed almost two million times.<sup>30</sup> Connecting the dots, the Russian propaganda has now added coronavirus into the mix. In Belgium, Britain, and the Netherlands this fabrication gained traction, leading to attacks on 5G towers and installations and abuse of 5G staff.<sup>31</sup>

Russia's troll farms have also been busy spreading disinformation about the coronavirus and its origins.<sup>32</sup> One such is the Russian Internet Research Agency, based in St. Petersburg and owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of President Vladimir Putin.<sup>33</sup> Since the start of 2020, it has tried to induce distrust in public institutions throughout the European Union. Agnieszka Legucka from the Polish Institute of International Affairs told Deutsche Welle,

With its various methods and channels, Russian disinformation remains a strong tool for contesting the order in Europe. And knowing the strategic goals of Russia's foreign policy, it won't end anytime soon; the European Union must prepare for a long-term campaign of disinformation.<sup>34</sup>

Russian conspiracy-mongers have also spread disinformation about billionaire Bill Gates. On March 3, ZVEZDA, a media company run by the Russian military, ran a story headlined “Bill Gates, a Secret Laboratory and a Conspiracy of Pharmaceutical Companies: Who Can Benefit from Coronavirus?”<sup>35</sup> Replete with the usual innuendo, the story suggests that Bill Gates knew about the coronavirus and predicted that it would kill 33 million people globally in less than a year. As it is usual with disinformation, this mixed some facts with the falsehoods. In October 2019, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, alongside the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security and the World Economic Forum, hosted a conference Event 201 simulating the spread of a new virus. The Russian story used that to conclude that Gates had a hand in the creation of the virus itself, in collusion with the Pentagon and the U.S. pharmaceutical companies. It also stated that COVID-19 only affects people of “the Mongoloid race,” suggesting a racist motivation.<sup>36</sup>

## The Troika of Disinfo

In an e-mail sent to media on April 21, titled “An Axis of Disinfo,” a State Department official drew attention to a report by the State Department’s Global Engagement Center (GEC) that highlighted the convergence of disinformation by these three disruptive geopolitical players.<sup>37</sup> The GEC report said, “While Russia, China, and Iran have converged on disinformation narratives in the past, the GEC assesses that their current convergence on COVID-19 disinformation has accelerated as the pandemic increasingly impacts the world and these regimes struggle to control public opinion in their own countries.” It added, “Although these actors regularly engage in disinformation and propaganda operations on a wide variety of geopolitical issues, COVID-19-related disinformation is especially irresponsible and harmful to vulnerable audiences around the globe.”

The European Union, meanwhile, independently arrived at a similar conclusion. An internal report by the EU’s External Action Service (EEAS), the EU diplomatic corps, found, “There is a trilateral convergence of disinformation narratives between Iran, Russia and China that are being multiplied in a co-ordinated manner, particularly on the origins of the virus (‘it is a biological weapon created in the US to bring their opponents down’) and on the response (‘we are doing much better than the West’).”<sup>38</sup>

This disinformation campaign has had success. The EEAS report said, “According to a poll published by Slovak paper Denník N, 67 percent of Slovak respondent say China is helping Slovakia fight COVID-19.” The report also cited a poll in Italy that shows “that for the first time Italians

look more to China than to the United States as a potential international partner.” The *Financial Times* separately conducted a study that revealed that heavily edited videos falsely showed Italians clapping from their balconies to the Chinese national anthem, thanking China for supposed aid. These videos were later shared on Facebook and Twitter by the Aula Radiofonica Confucio CRI-Uni-Italia, the Italian-language division of China Radio International Service. “Italy has become front and centre for disinformation in Chinese on social media,” Alessandro Ciapetti, from the fact-checking website Pagella Politica told the *Financial Times*.<sup>39</sup> Unsurprisingly, the EEAS report found that the percentage of Italians responding to a poll that China was a good friend to Italy went from 10 percent in January to 52 percent in March.

The GEC, set up by President Barack Obama in March 2016 to expose and counter foreign disinformation campaigns “in order to counter the messaging and diminish the influence of international terrorist organizations”<sup>40</sup> said that by mid-March the three states were sharing many similar disinformation messages. These included the falsehoods that the virus was a U.S.-made bioweapon, it was spread by U.S. troops, Russia and China were helping the West while the U.S. was negligent, and the U.S. sanctions were killing Iranians during the pandemic. The GEC singled out Russia for its “reckless behavior” in spreading disinformation, which “endangers global health by undermining the efforts of governments, health agencies, and organizations in charge of disseminating accurate information about the virus to the public, and shows once again Russia is willing to take advantage of global health concerns for its own gain.”<sup>41</sup>

The disinformation by these three state actors does not stay in their countries, of course. China, Russia, and Iran own substantial media outlets all over the world, including in the United States and Europe. As an example of the magnitude of the troika’s reach, Latin American researcher Joseph Humire writes, “Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela...are also all using their state-controlled media to propagate China’s ‘talking points’ about COVID-19 in Spanish, Portuguese, and other native languages, such as Aymara and Quechua, in Latin America, where they consistently claim that the virus originated in the United States.”<sup>42</sup> Even in the United States and Europe, journalists often become willing accomplices of disinformation campaigns by foreign actors. For example, the headline of a Reuters dispatch from Beijing read, “China Refutes 24 ‘Lies’ by U.S. Politicians over Coronavirus.”<sup>43</sup> On May 14, a Reuters reporter also tweeted clear Cuban disinformation, even if she did add in parenthesis that “some dispute” the obviously fake news figures.

So, #Florida has had more #coronavirus deaths than #Cuba has had confirmed cases, according to official data (which some people dispute is accurate). Its population is only twice the size. Today it registered 808 new cases, #Cuba registered 20.<sup>44</sup>

## What Not to Do

In thinking about what America and the other democracies can do to counteract information warfare waged by Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran, it is perhaps best to think first of what not to do. Above all, governments and the private sector must resist efforts by China, especially, and other foreign governments to censor criticism of their actions. As government and private companies seek to expose and root out foreign disinformation, they should also take extra care not to inhibit the freedom of speech of Americans. A counter-disinformation strategy must not become an excuse to stamp out legitimate uses of free speech to criticize governmental efforts to fight COVID-19. Lastly, as with all things China, it is important to resist the temptation to believe that China has become such an adversary that America must “decouple” from it economically.

The European example is important in this context. The EU, for example, caved in to Chinese pressure and in late April softened its criticism of Beijing’s disinformation campaign in the aforementioned EEAS report.<sup>45</sup> In the face of phone calls, e-mails, and threats from Chinese officials, the EU bureaucrats first delayed the report and then heavily edited the report. Thus, hard-hitting sentences in the original report:

Reports indicate that China has continued to run a global disinformation campaign to deflect blame for the outbreak of the pandemic and improve its international image. Both overt and covert tactics have been observed.

became more tame in the edited, public version:

Reports indicate that there are continued efforts at deflecting blame for the outbreak of the pandemic, involving both overt and covert tactics.<sup>46</sup>

**Gone also was this reference to Chinese disinformation against France:**

On its website, the Chinese Embassy in France criticized France’s response to the virus. One of the posts included made-up allegations that French parliamentarians, together with Taiwanese officials, used racist slurs against WHO Director Tedros.

**Gone from the final product were also these lines, which paralleled the GEC report:**

There is a trilateral convergence of disinformation narratives between Iran, Russia and China that are being multiplied in a co-ordinated manner, particularly on the origins of the virus (“it is a biological weapon created in the US to bring their opponents down”) and on the response (“we are doing much better than the West”).

**The final, public report did strike out at China, Russia, and Iran, stating:**

Despite their potentially grave impact on public health, official and state-backed sources from various governments, including Russia and—to a lesser extent—China, have continued to widely target conspiracy narratives and disinformation both at public audiences in the EU and the wider neighbourhood.<sup>47</sup>

**Other important lines did stay, such as**

State-controlled sources targeting audiences in the EU, Eastern Partnership countries, the Western Balkans and the MENA region continue to portray the EU and its partners as ineffective, divided and cynical in their response to the COVID-19. As such, the pandemic is repeatedly presented as a weakness of democratic systems to effectively deal with the crisis.<sup>48</sup>

The kowtow to Beijing became a scandal after *The New York Times* and *Politico* reported on it, quoting infuriated EEAS officials who were trying to resist the attempt to self-censor criticism of China. At a parliamentary hearing, the European Parliament severely criticized the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell, who denied that China’s pressure had led to the editing. “We have not bowed to anyone,” Borrell said, “There was no watering down of our findings.” Borrell did, however, admit that “[i]t’s clear and evident that China expressed their concerns when they knew the document that was leaked.” Borrell further pretended that the reports were two different work products, one internal and the edited one external.<sup>49</sup>

That explanation beggars belief. Obviously, the EU caved in, probably out of fear of losing business opportunities for European companies in China. It makes no sense to share facts on the information warfare of adversaries only internally, while keeping the general public ignorant of such misdeeds. Avoiding repeating this European mistake is an important lesson to draw.

Another European example not to follow is the Spanish government’s attempts to stifle criticism of its handling of the crisis. The warning came, no

less, from the chief of staff of the Guardia Civil, much feared under Franco, who said his police force was “working to minimize the climate against the government’s management of the crisis.”<sup>50</sup>

In this vein, it is important to note that, in 2020, what technology giants such as Facebook and Twitter do is just as important as what governments do. As they move to stamp out the use of their platforms for the propagation of disinformation, the companies have either applied their standards inconsistently or shown a bias for international institutions that is not warranted by their record.

In April, for example, YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki said the video giant would remove videos that contradict World Health Organization recommendations on COVID-19.<sup>51</sup> YouTube is not alone. Facebook also announced that it would direct people who have liked or reacted to misinformation on COVID-19 to a “myth-buster” page. As Katrina Trinko of The Heritage Foundation’s Daily Signal asked in a post in late April, the “WHO has long opposed travel bans in pandemics. Does that mean YouTube would take down a video advocating travel bans? Or is YouTube going to distinguish between the WHO’s views on, say, turmeric and its views on travel bans?”<sup>52</sup> Conservatives often complain that these platforms are run by people who lean to the left. Will interaction with posts on such issues as climate change, transgenderism, identity politics, and other culture-war hotspots be subjected to the same scrutiny, in the name of fighting disinformation?

All of this strongly suggests that government and the private sector should respond by exposing foreign disinformation publicly when it is found and share it with the media in a major publicity effort. The social media companies are private and set their own standards independently from government writ, but censoring the speech of Americans should also be exposed and condemned.

## Recommendations

Because Americans want to remain free, U.S. leaders face a dilemma. They need to take foreign information warfare seriously. During the COVID-19 crisis, this is a matter of public health. According to the EEAS report, for example, one-third of U.K. citizens believe that vodka can be used as hand-sanitizer. But the danger goes beyond that, as we will not always live in a COVID-19 world.

The adversaries of the democracies use disinformation to destabilize them internally and thus weaken their ability to act internationally. The Iranian attempt to use the pandemic to escape sanctions is an example. There is always a risk when the population is being misled, but especially so in a democracy, where citizens form opinions and then vote according to the information they receive.

There is also the foreign relations aspect. If populations from Europe to Africa and Latin America believe falsehoods about America, they will pressure their leaders to distance themselves. At the same time, however, American leaders must not mimic the authoritarian behavior to which America's adversaries resort. Again, the leaders of countries such as China, Russia, and Iran hide the truth and spread lies because they must create a parallel, fictitious, universe in which their systems are superior and pluralist multiparty democracies are inept and paralyzed by the exigencies of the ballot box. This needle has been threaded successfully before, such as during the Cold War when the democracies banded together to defend themselves from communist Soviet domination.

China, Russia, and Iran have converged in their disinformation messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic, and will again in the future, because they reject the liberal democratic system, know that their systems are inferior, and therefore must employ deception. This gives us some idea where to start.

The U.S. government therefore must:

- **Enhance cooperation among the democracies on disinformation.**

The democracies of the world must make a greater effort to coordinate among themselves in the fight against information warfare. The U.S. government must replicate the leading role it played during the Cold War, this time to marshal allies and friends such as Australia, Canada, Chile, the European states, India, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and Taiwan in the effort to coordinate information. The goal is to share information on what governments and the private sector have discovered in the area of disinformation and what the national governments intend to do about it. Coordination in identifying and exposing disinformation is important and will save precious time. Enhanced coordination, if done correctly, can strengthen the backbone of governments under pressure from governments such as China's. The coordination would best be carried out intergovernmentally and not involve supranational or intergovernmental organizations such as the U.N. or the EU. The U.N. is a forum that grants membership rights to non-democracies, including two of the worst offenders in disinformation, China and Russia, which are permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. The EU, meanwhile, has shown itself to be vulnerable to the machinations of a single member, which can paralyze the actions of the entire continent. It is thus part of the problem.

- **Seek media reciprocity with China and Russia.** The United States and its allies must push Beijing and Moscow for greater reciprocity in media access. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has already begun some of this spadework with China, an effort that should be redoubled and coordinated with European allies and extended to Russia. There is no reason why Sputnik Radio and RT, for example, should be allowed to broadcast on U.S. radio stations when U.S. outlets are denied access to radio and television airwaves in Russia. Same applies to RT's TV access in the U.S. with no reciprocal access inside Russia.
- **Take seriously the need to reform and increase support for U.S. international broadcasting.** The Trump Administration did not make it a priority to seat Michael Pack, its nominee to head the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), until very late in his term of office. This May, Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ), the ranking member in the Foreign Relations Committee, stymied the nomination against the backdrop of what looks like a partisan investigation by the District of Columbia into Pack's finances. Obama-era holdovers are consequently still running the BBG's international broadcasting services, especially Voice of America. The point of view presently often chimes with the antagonistic anti-Trump commercial media establishment and echoes Chinese propaganda, creating a situation in which the U.S. broadcasters are at odds with the very U.S. policy that their charter required them to explain to a global audience.
- **Focus NATO's Centers of Excellence on fighting COVID-19 disinformation.** NATO should encourage its Centers of Excellence to assist with the COVID-19 disinformation campaign, especially at the centers focusing on cyberspace (Estonia) and countering propaganda (Latvia).

## Conclusion

Disinformation is a clear threat to the American way of life, which is why the adversaries of the democracies are putting so much effort into it. America and her allies should take heed. They should not be lulled into thinking that the democratic model holds such obvious advantages that it will always win over what the "Beijing Model" and the other alternatives offer. Information warfare is just that, warfare by another means. A counter-effort must begin right away.

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