

## V. Competing Over Ideology and Narrative

America's ability to compete over ideology and reset the dominant narratives in the region will be powerful determinants of whether the United States can build the types of coalitions and partnerships necessary to support a free and open Indo-Pacific. How publics and capitals view the relative virtues, balances of power, and trajectories of economic influence—and fundamentally, whether the United States presents an attractive and viable long-term alternative to a Sino-centric future—will be at the core of regional countries' decisions to either stand up or acquiesce to Beijing.

Well aware of the stakes in this dimension of the competition, China has been spending tremendous resources around the world employing propaganda, public diplomacy, and strategic messaging to promote a narrative of its inexorable ascendance coupled with America's inevitable decline. At the same time, the Chinese Communist Party has used both overt and illicit means to influence businesses, media, universities, and thought leaders within democratic societies to shape debates, blunt criticism, and build support for its policies at home and abroad. Uneven levels of governance in the Indo-Pacific alongside China's growing control over local media markets have further facilitated these efforts.

When coupled with real-world actions such as China's ongoing military buildup and expansionist behavior in the South China Sea, technological achievements, and overseas investments under the banner of its Belt and Road, Beijing's narrative has successfully convinced large parts of the Indo-Pacific that momentum is on its side, even when the facts on the ground are more mixed. If Washington is unable to reverse these perceptions, the United States will find it difficult, if not impossible, to generate sufficient support for its economic, political, and military initiatives in the region.

Even as the United States must do more to renew its democratic principles at home, it still retains considerable advantages in the ideological competition between liberal democracy and China's model of authoritarianism and state-led economics. Consistent with a dominant theme that appears throughout this assessment, competing effectively with China over ideology should begin by reinforcing America's inherent strengths. Rule of law, representative government, ethnic diversity, and freedom of the press and religion are all vital U.S. assets that, if sustained domestically, can be trumpeted abroad—particularly when contrasted with the Chinese Communist Party's tightening chokehold on the rights and freedoms of the Chinese people.

Competing more effectively over narratives and ideology will also require greater attention and fundamental reforms to the U.S. government's ability to conduct strategic messaging and information operations. The United States will need new public diplomacy institutions—optimized for the digital age—that can effectively communicate and promote America's substantial contributions to the region's security and prosperity. Most elites and publics in the region still prefer American leadership, meaning that countries in the Indo-Pacific are primed to welcome a more coherent and positive American narrative, particularly if backed by the economic and diplomatic initiatives recommended in this report.

As China's propaganda machine continues attacking American democracy and society, U.S. officials should be highlighting the Chinese Communist Party's mistreatment of its own people, as well as the CCP's mismanagement of China's economy and foreign policy. Moreover, the United States can better leverage the fact that confidence in Communist Party Secretary Xi Jinping is low throughout much of the region, and Beijing's geopolitical motivations remain widely mistrusted. Shining a brighter spotlight on China's oppression at home and its corrupt and assertive activities overseas could provide a more realistic view of the ruling regime and make it harder and less desirable for surrounding states to accept China's regional leadership. Washington could do more to expose China's malign activities by selectively declassifying intelligence, as well as using U.S. public diplomacy to encourage Muslim populations around the world to more vocally condemn China's reprehensible actions in Xinjiang.

Finally, the United States should strengthen its own domestic protections against China's influence efforts, while also promoting resiliency within and among like-minded allies and partners. The U.S. government should institute mandatory transparency requirements for U.S. institutions that receive Chinese government funding and should broaden the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) to include official Chinese propaganda and media. Given that CCP influence operations threaten democratic governance and other U.S. interests overseas, the United States should lead multilateral efforts on information sharing and best practices to limit China's ability to influence open societies.

## Recommendations for U.S. Policy

### STRENGTHEN U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

#### *Rebuild and enhance U.S. public diplomacy institutions*

The U.S. government's current approach to public diplomacy is largely piecemeal, unfocused, and underresourced. Public affairs operations are not well coordinated across government agencies and are mostly tactical in posture—focused on day-to-day talking points, rather than on strategic messaging campaigns executed over months or years. The Global Engagement Center (GEC), mandated by Congress to lead the U.S. government in exposing and countering propaganda and disinformation by foreign actors, including China, remains understaffed relative to its expansive mission.<sup>78</sup> Going forward, the U.S. government should forge a more robust, whole-of-government public diplomacy capability that is optimized for the digital age.<sup>79</sup> Strategic messaging should be considered and developed as a core component of U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific, rather than an afterthought in support of existing policies. Within the State Department, measures to integrate training across different divisions—including political, consular, economic, management, and public diplomacy—could support a more unified public diplomacy apparatus through which effective messaging is used to advance policy outcomes. Public diplomacy officers should also be trained to work closely with designated counterparts in the intelligence community to respond to disinformation campaigns and engage in targeted counter-messaging.<sup>80</sup>

#### *Optimize U.S. information efforts for social media and targeted audiences*

Public diplomacy officers should further leverage video, graphic design, interactive infographics, and other formats to creatively disseminate information about U.S. government policies and initiatives. Foreign service officers and other in-country embassy staff should also be trained to employ U.S. and local social media platforms and use translations of different products to expand the reach of their messaging.<sup>81</sup> U.S. public diplomacy should develop capabilities to detect and rapidly respond to emergent opportunities. For example, the State Department could leverage artificial

intelligence-powered sentiment analysis of local news and social media, as well as U.S. Embassy reporting, to track public attitudes and tailor U.S. public diplomacy accordingly.<sup>82</sup>

#### *Launch public diplomacy campaigns to highlight and promote U.S. economic initiatives, development assistance, and private-sector investments in the Indo-Pacific*

Even more important than shining a light on China's bad behavior, an effective U.S. counternarrative should highlight America's positive contributions, particularly related to both the quality and quantity of U.S. economic engagement in the region, including substantial U.S. private-sector investments.<sup>83</sup> Washington should amplify messaging around the U.S. government's vast economic and development assistance initiatives in the Indo-Pacific—including the establishment of a new U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, U.S. coordination with Japan on regional energy investments, and the establishment of a U.S.-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership—as well as tangible USAID and OPIC-financed infrastructure projects and Department of Defense exercise-related construction (ERC).<sup>84</sup> This in turn requires providing ambassadors and their public diplomacy teams more freedom and financial latitude to pursue original initiatives that can spotlight enduring and reassuring forms of American engagement and investment.

### EXPOSE CHINA'S ILLEGAL, AGGRESSIVE, AND REPRESSIVE ACTIONS

#### *Communicate directly and more systematically to publics both at home and abroad about Beijing's malign activities*

Senior U.S. government officials and members of Congress should lead a systematic campaign to educate key U.S. stakeholders—including universities, civil society, and the private sector—about the nature of the China challenge. U.S. leaders should employ a full suite of social media, speeches, private briefings, and opinion pieces to communicate to the American people the urgency of coordinating a whole-of-society approach to compete with Beijing.<sup>85</sup> In public communications, members of the executive and legislative branches should clearly differentiate between the Chinese people and the malign activities of the CCP. In doing so, U.S. officials should absolutely avoid casting the challenge that

Beijing poses in civilizational or racial terms, which misrepresents the root of the problem and risks heightened xenophobia at home. In communications with global audiences, Washington should continue to raise awareness around challenges associated with China's overseas investment, including the erosion of national sovereignty, lack of transparency, unsustainable financial burdens, disengagement from local economic needs, geopolitical risks, negative environmental impacts, and the significant potential for corruption.<sup>86</sup>

***Redesign declassification processes to make it easier to release public information about the Chinese Communist Party's wrongdoings***

U.S. intelligence agencies regularly acquire information about China's illiberal, illegal, and corrupt behavior against its own people and abroad. The executive branch should consider when it may be appropriate to loosen declassification processes and authorities to engage in more effective U.S. information operations. Too often, this information is unnecessarily classified and withheld from U.S. policymakers, the American people, and U.S. allies and partners. While still putting a premium on protecting intelligence sources and methods, selective declassification of certain information would better inform the U.S. public and the international community about the often corrupt and abusive domestic and foreign policies of the CCP.<sup>87</sup>

***Draw attention to the repression of Uighurs as a religious freedom issue and encourage Muslim communities in Southeast Asia and beyond to speak out***

Public reactions in even Muslim-majority Southeast Asian countries to Beijing's oppression of Uighurs in China have been relatively muted. The main excuse that Chinese authorities give for Beijing's campaign of oppression in Xinjiang is that their goal is to prevent terrorism and increase safety.<sup>88</sup> Despite knowing better, many governments of Muslim-majority countries, in the absence of public pressure, have supported this false narrative. The United States, in its diplomacy with Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia and beyond, should articulate China's treatment of Uighurs as a religious freedom issue. One way to do this is to compile a comprehensive list of ways that Beijing directly targets adherence to Islam, including outlawing fasting during Ramadan, destroying mosques

and religious schools, punishing Uighurs for speaking languages other than Mandarin, and monitoring imam sermons in real time.<sup>89</sup> In relatively democratic Muslim-majority countries, greater public focus on Xinjiang as a religious freedom issue could help to create pressure on governments to respond.

**BUILD RESILIENCY TO CHINA'S PROPAGANDA AND INFLUENCE OPERATIONS**

***Institute mandatory transparency for U.S. educational and civil society institutions receiving Chinese government funding***

A number of U.S. universities, academic departments, individual scholars, think tanks, and other civil society organizations receive substantial funding from Beijing that is often targeted at shaping views and discourse on China.<sup>90</sup> Higher degrees of transparency can help to ensure that this funding is not generating hidden forms of foreign lobbying, self-censorship, or other activities that undermine core U.S. democratic principles. To that end, the U.S. government should significantly lower the funding cap that triggers a requirement for U.S. institutions to disclose these foreign contributions. Concurrently, Congress should also expand the reach of the Foreign Agents Registration Act to require universities to set standards and limits for student organizations and cultural exchange institutions that rely on external, especially foreign government, sources of funding.<sup>91</sup>

***Require disclaimers on direct foreign government propaganda, including through reform of the Foreign Agents Registration Act***

Positive initial steps have been taken to enforce FARA more systematically for state-run and state-funded press outlets to register as foreign agents, as well as the Federal Election Campaign Act, which requires that campaign-related advertisements contain disclaimers. To provide even broader public transparency, the U.S. government should require that Chinese and other state media label their public productions with clear and prominent disclaimers that indicate their funding streams, particularly from foreign governments.<sup>92</sup> Congress should also bring greater scrutiny to U.S. media outlets that legitimize Chinese state-run propaganda by running it on their websites and in print in ways that are barely distinguishable from content that is generated or approved by the host platform.

***Help to root out Chinese Communist Party influence in key ally and partner countries***

The United States should convene regular dialogues with Five Eyes countries to share best practices for addressing China's influence efforts during elections, as well as in media, entertainment, academia, and the private sector. Beyond Five Eyes consultations, the United States should hold a similar multilateral dialogue with a more expansive grouping of allies and partners, particularly Taiwan and countries in Southeast Asia, as well as select countries beyond the Indo-Pacific that are at the front lines of CCP influence campaigns, including in Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. As part of these larger dialogues, the United States should encourage its allies and partners to share technical expertise and best practices for identifying and countering CCP domestic interference, including through more rigorous reporting requirements for spending on paid advertisements, media ownership structures, and other ties to the CCP.<sup>93</sup> Recognizing that many of its allies and partners fear retribution by Beijing, the United States should publicly frame this dialogue as centered on upholding sovereignty against foreign interference, rather than explicitly aimed at countering CCP influence campaigns.