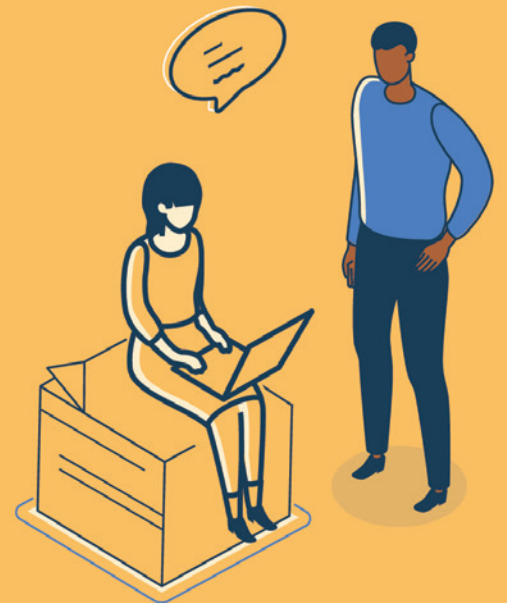


Mendacious Mixture

The Growing Convergence of Russian and Chinese Information Operations

By Andrea Kendall-Taylor



The COVID-19 pandemic has shined a light on a new challenge to the information ecosystem: the increasing convergence of Russian and Chinese information operations.¹ In the early days of the pandemic, Beijing assumed a more aggressive approach to its information operations than has historically been the case. In some instances, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) even deployed tactics taken from Russia's intentionally disruptive playbook. This change in the CCP's tactics calls into question the predominant view of Russian and Chinese approaches.

According to this view, although Moscow and Beijing share some common goals—weakening U.S. influence and dividing U.S. alliances, for example—they pursue different approaches to advancing their objectives. The Kremlin has been confrontational and destructive, attacking its opponents by, for example, amplifying false narratives or using divisive rhetoric.² The CCP, by contrast, has typically relied on a more incremental and diffuse strategy, preferring to create positive perceptions of China and the CCP as a responsible global actor.³ Russian and Chinese actions during the pandemic, however, underscore how these lines are being blurred and why it is increasingly important for observers to challenge some long held assumptions.

The convergence of Russian and Chinese tactics in the informational domain is taking place within the context of a broader trend toward increasing cooperation between the two countries. Russia and China, despite the longstanding distrust between them, are deepening ties and increasing coordination on a range of economic, defense, technological, and political issues.⁴ These repeated interactions facilitate a sharing of best practices and create a foundation for sustained cooperation. The convergence of CCP and Kremlin tactics, therefore, is about more than “authoritarian learning,” or the passive diffusion of such practices from one authoritarian regime to the next. Instead, Russia and China are likely working together more concertedly than previously assumed. Moreover, because their influence tactics are converging within the context of the two countries' broader geopolitical alignment, liberal democracies are liable to face enduring challenges from both countries in the information environment.⁵

Moscow and Beijing's alignment in the information space is amplifying the challenges that their individual tactics pose. For example, both governments are now advancing the same or overlapping narratives, increasing the dose of their toxic messaging on a range of issues from the origins of the novel coronavirus to the CCP's human rights violations in Xinjiang Province and the crackdown on democratic systems in Hong Kong.⁶ Such alignment has even been evident in the traditional media space, where both are building news and information networks outside their borders. Chinese and Russian state media outlets

increasingly are working together and echoing each other's narratives, especially their criticism of the United States.⁷ Even when their approaches are not aligned, their combined tactics have a corrosive effect. A loose tactical division of labor has emerged between Beijing's and Moscow's digital influence activities in which Russia weakens information spaces by sowing false narratives and flooding platforms with content critical of the United States and its institutions, making them more vulnerable to the CCP's affirmative messaging about China's ability to provide global leadership amid U.S. retrenchment. The sum of these two parts is more potent than either alone.

Detailed case studies of China-Russia coordination remain limited... rigorous research efforts to understand the effects of authoritarian digital influence campaigns on the perceptions of citizens in democracies—that is, what tactics actually succeed in shaping views—are similarly limited.

How can democracies respond to this troubling convergence?⁸ Russian and Chinese efforts to distort and manipulate the information environment will be difficult to deter. Naturally, liberal democracies should seek to coordinate responses, thereby raising the collective costs that Moscow and Beijing face, but a mere pooling of efforts cannot be the only approach (and enduring coordination is far from easy to sustain). Initiatives designed to increase resilience (and thereby mitigate the effects of Chinese and Russian operations) also will be critical to safeguarding the information environment. As liberal democratic actors undertake efforts to increase the resilience of their societies, they must take care to uphold their liberal democratic values in the process. In particular, care must be taken to avoid distorting information or compromising the fundamental openness of societies. To increase resilience to Kremlin and CCP information operations, policymakers in affected countries must explore a number of potential responses.

Those who intend to oppose coordinated Sino-Russian information operations must better understand their mechanics in order to stay a step ahead of them. Detailed case studies of China-Russia coordination remain limited, even as evidence of growing synergies between the two mounts. Moreover, rigorous research efforts to understand the effects of authoritarian digital influence campaigns on the perceptions of citizens in democracies—that is, what tactics actually succeed in shaping views—are similarly limited. Addressing these analytic gaps is a prerequisite to helping policymakers expose the operations, prioritize the problem, and enact policy responses that bolster democratic resiliency to digital influence campaigns by both China and Russia. At the same time, coordination between Russia and China is likely to continue and evolve in ways that negatively affect the integrity of the information environment. It will not be enough to merely react to trends today. Think tanks, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and universities can all play a role in raising insight into the current and possible future landscapes.

To bolster the legitimate media space and reduce the public's vulnerability to disruptive information operations, democratic actors should also pursue a more proactive approach focused on education and innovation. Digital literacy is one such area that deserves greater attention. Several European countries (including Sweden, The Netherlands, Germany, and the Czech Republic) have media literacy programs. This is a best practice that should spread across democracies and focus on teaching students and older adults alike about disinformation campaigns and how to avoid manipulation when consuming news. In many cases, NGOs and other civil society actors will be the most credible conduits of such information.⁹

At the same time, as autocracies like China and Russia use technology to supercharge their efforts, democracies should identify opportunities to harness new technology to combat

influence operations. For example, can artificial intelligence help identify harmful narratives before they gain significant traction? Likewise, as Russian actors in particular turn to graphic and video formats that are more difficult to identify and analyze, what solutions exist to counter these efforts? Greater public-private partnerships will be needed to tackle these emerging challenges.

The war for information cannot be won without independent, fact-based, and accessible media, particularly aimed at those who have been neglected by traditional media outlets.

The war for information cannot be won without independent, fact-based, and accessible media, particularly aimed at those who have been neglected by traditional media outlets. Beijing and Moscow have sought to fill information vacuums by mobilizing Chinese- and Russian-language diasporas through a variety of instruments, including digital influence campaigns. Given the role these diasporas play within U.S. allies in Eastern Europe and Asia, ensuring that these populations have access to credible and independent information sources in their home languages should be a priority for the United States and other democratic allies.¹⁰ Subsidies also may be needed to support fact-based content in regions where affordability matters most. In developing countries, pricing can play a critical role in determining what sources populations turn to for information; Beijing in particular has made a concerted effort to shape the information ecosystems of developing countries by offering free content to local providers and supporting on-the-ground activities by Chinese media companies, such as converting households from analog to digital television. The United States can do more to bring down the cost of fact-based content and invest in building the capacity of on-the-ground content providers in developing countries.

Awareness and activism also can help reclaim contested information spaces. In Europe, for example, the threat from Moscow is a proverbial clear and present danger. Views of China, in contrast, are less cohesive, though national governments and the European Union are more attuned to and concerned about the challenges stemming from China's growing influence.¹¹ Efforts to underscore the alignment and coordination between Russia and China could increase the urgency in Europe and elsewhere to address the China challenge. Think tanks and civil society organizations can shine a much-needed light on Russian and Chinese activities in local media environments, and push governments to take the threat seriously and address it.

As Russia and China work together to legitimize norm change, the United States and liberal democracies need to show up in multilateral organizations to counter this corrosive trend. The United States could build expertise and competence of foreign participation in multilateral organizations to help create greater headwinds. NGOs too play a role in the United Nations process and can create pressure for liberal democracies to collectively address the challenge.

Finally, democracies should think outside the information space. Media organizations, NGOs, and other civil society actors can play a role in addressing divisions and grievances in society that make populations more vulnerable to information operations. Russian and Chinese narratives are most successful when they are grounded in truth and exploit societal divisions. Organizations that address such divisions and sources of discontent and encourage a healthy public discourse around them will better inoculate societies from disinformation.

Endnotes

- 1 Daniel Kliman, Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Kristine Lee, Joshua Fitt, and Carisa Nietzsche, *Dangerous Synergies: Countering Chinese and Russian Digital Influence Operations*, Center for a New American Security, May 2020, www.cnas.org/publications/reports/dangerous-synergies.
- 2 For examples, see Dean Jackson, "How Disinformation Impacts Politics and Publics," National Endowment for Democracy, 29 May 2018, www.ned.org/issue-brief-how-disinformation-impacts-politics-and-publics.
- 3 For illustrations of this trend, see Sarah Cook, *Beijing's Global Megaphone*, Freedom House, January 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/beijings-global-megaphone>.
- 4 Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, "A Russian-Chinese Partnership Is a Threat to U.S. Interests," *Foreign Affairs*, 14 May 2019, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-05-14/russian-chinese-partnership-threat-us-interests.
- 5 Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, "Converging Chinese and Russian Disinformation Compounds Threat to Democracy," Power 3.0 blog, 26 May 2020, www.power3point0.org/2020/05/26/converging-chinese-and-russian-disinformation-compounds-threat-to-democracy.
- 6 Stephanie Bodoni, "China, Russia Are Spreading Virus Misinformation, EU Says," Bloomberg, 10 June 2020, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-10/eu-points-finger-at-china-russia-for-covid-19-disinformation; Thomas Grove, "Russia Gives China a Leg Up in Foreign Broadcasting," *Wall Street Journal*, 14 January 2020, www.wsj.com/articles/russia-gives-china-a-leg-up-in-foreign-broadcasting-11579003202.
- 7 Laura Rosenberger, "Making Cyberspace Safe for Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, 13 April 2020, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-04-13/making-cyberspace-safe-democracy.
- 8 For addition detail on these and other recommendations, see Kliman et al., *Dangerous Synergies*.
- 9 See also Jamie Fly, Laura Rosenberger, and David Salvo, "The ASD Policy Blueprint for Countering Authoritarian Interference in Democracies," German Marshall Fund, June 2018, www.gmfus.org/publications/asd-policy-blueprint-countering-authoritarian-interference-democracies.
- 10 Kliman et al., *Dangerous Synergies*.
- 11 Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries," Pew Research Center, 6 October 2020, www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries.