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Claremont McKenna College

Great Power Politics: The United States' War on
Disinformation with Consideration to Russian and
Chinese Offensive Efforts

submitted to

Professor Hilary Appel

by

Jordan J. Venglass

for

Senior Thesis

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the growing national security threat posed by Russia and China's willingness to exercise 21st century information warfare techniques against the United States and its areas of strategic interest. This study will describe the composition of these state's foreign disinformation entities while providing several case studies that display their advanced capabilities and the direct effects that each poses on the general public both domestically and internationally. To best provide unbiased reporting and accuracy in each country's analysis, this study will rely on the diversified use of government reports, legal documents, academic journals, and news articles. After research into each state, this study will conclude with several recommendations for President-elect Joe Biden and his administration. Ultimately this study will advance the belief that as the United States changes administration, it remains imperative that the federal government acknowledges the growing threat of international adversaries that actively target our democracy and act proactively in defensive and offensive measures.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the unwavering support offered by Professor Hilary Appel. Without having the opportunity to take a course with Professor Appel, I would have never discovered my passion for international relations. Even though I was fairly quiet during class discussion, I want you to know that it was simply an attempt to allow for me to take in your vast wealth of knowledge and expertise. You have taken the time to voluntarily foster my intellectual curiosity with opportunities outside of the traditional classroom setting and for that I am grateful. Thank you for your help and I hope to remain in contact with you for years to come.

Additionally, I would like to acknowledge my parents, Jeff and Melissa, for providing me with the opportunity to find my calling and pursue it without hesitation. It has been an inspiration to watch and learn from you both throughout my twenty-two years of life, thus far. There has not been a day that passes by over the past four years, where I fail to reflect on the opportunities that I have been afforded due to your commitment to providing for me. From early mornings on the track, to caring for me after a military training exercise, to daily facetime check-ins... thank you for always being there and pushing me to go one step further.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends, my fellow soldiers, and the faculty of Claremont McKenna College. Without the empowerment that I received from each and everyone of you, I truly would not be the person that I am today. Your stories, your wisdom, and your selflessness has empowered me to overcome the imposter syndrome that had once consumed me as a first generation college and transfer student. I entered into this four year journey as an insecure follower and I will proudly leave as a confident leader.

Cheers to the lasting prosperity of our great nation and the generations of brave and selfless men and women that have dedicated their lives to service on behalf of the American people. May God bless our democracy and may God bless the United States of America.

“The harder the conflict, the greater the triumph” - George Washington

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Introduction and Overview

Disinformation (n.): false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.¹

- Merriam Webster's Dictionary

The democratic system within the United States has thrived thanks to the trust that the American voters bestow upon the electoral system. However, in light of events over the past decade, we have been witness to the degradation of a fair and just system. Moreover, we have become unknowing actors in the complex decades-long rivalry between international superpowers — the United States of America, the Russian Federation, and the People's Republic of China. Reflecting on the events of the 2016 Presidential Election in the United States, millions of American voters became blind victims and aided in carrying out the spread of disinformation that originated from the increasingly aggressive international adversaries, who have fueled criticism of the United States and its democratic system. Are Russia and China to blame for the growing skepticism surrounding the purity and functionality of our system, and are we serving as unwitting enablers in advancing the impact of related disinformation campaigns?

In the past two decades, we have seen the rise of technology giants, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter that have driven a sense of a virtual mutual community among users across the globe through social media platforms. However, the rise of these platforms has adversely affected the traditional means by which individuals connect with each other, become informed, and formulate their opinions on current events. The Pew Research Center, a Washington D.C.-based nonpartisan think tank, reported in 2016 that 62% of U.S. adults received their news from social media, with 64% of these individuals only getting news from one

¹ "Definition of Disinformation," Merriam-webster.com (*Merriam-Webster*, 2019), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disinformation>.

given social media platform.² The growing reliance on social media has directly affected the news industry, as early to middle stage media outlets are being forced to shut down or merge with the big-name networks that control the industry.³ As we see titans of the industry, such as CNN or Fox News, relentlessly strive to extend their brands' reach across these platforms, we have seen a rise in subjective reporting. These outlets deviate from the traditional nonpartisan and objective reporting strategy, thus creating a population of users that are increasingly polarized.

President Obama and Social Media Campaigning

Beginning in 2008, Barack Obama as a Presidential candidate paved the way for implementing social media strategy into politics. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2008 was the first year “that more than half [of] the voting-age population used the internet to connect to the political process during an election cycle.”⁴ While the study shows that Republican voters were more likely to be users of the internet due to education and income levels, the Obama voters had cultivated the concept of online political activism.⁵ The 2008 election had figuratively opened the floodgates to a reshaped strategy behind 21st-century politics in the face of a social media-dominated era. Subsequently, we can see how this developing political strategy has fueled a growing divide between the two major political parties — the Republicans and the Democrats. This divide is continuously exacerbated by the media

² Jeffrey Gottfried and Elisa Shearer, “*News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2016*,” Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project, December 27, 2017, <https://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/>.

³ David Shimer, *Rigged: America, Russia, and One Hundred Years of Covert Electoral Interference* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020), 246.

⁴ Aaron Smith, “*The Internet’s Role in Campaign 2008*,” Pew Research Center: Internet and Technology (Pew Research Center, April 15, 2009), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2009/04/15/the-internets-role-in-campaign-2008/>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

titans of the industry, who flood the social media timelines of their users with subjective opinion-driven articles that aggressively attack the opposing view.

Origins of Mass Media and Disinformation

While 21st-century technology platforms that have capabilities of reporting news have become undoubtedly linked to politics during the rise of the ‘Information Age’, it is important that we understand that manipulation of this decade’s long relationship between politics and reporting has long been exploited by state-backed entities to promote disinformation campaigns across domestic and international communities.⁶ Scholars often credit the origins of media disinformation to the 15th century, with the creation of the Gutenberg Printing Press.⁷ By the beginning of the 16th century, the church had begun to utilize this technology for mass publication and by the beginning of the 17th century, the first widespread international distribution of newspapers led by independent organizations was documented.⁸ Along with the rapid spread of news came the uptick in demands for content and newspapers had begun to be overrun with unverifiable stories that ranged from eye witness accounts on sea monsters and witches to natural disasters and the church.⁹

Though there are centuries of documented disinformation campaigns throughout modern history, this thesis focuses on the more recent cases of states utilizing disinformation as a means to control public narrative and thought. While Germany fell under the rule of the Nazi Party beginning in the early 19th century, Adolf Hitler had devised the concept of the Reich Ministry

⁶ “Definition of Information Age,” Merriam-webster.com (*Merriam-Webster*, 2019), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Information%20Age>.

⁷ Marina Gorbis, “*Our Gutenberg Moment (SSIR)*,” ssir.org (Stanford Social Innovation Review, March 17, 2017), https://ssir.org/articles/entry/our_gutenberg_moment.

⁸ History.com Editors, “Printing Press,” History.com (History.com, May 7, 2018), <https://www.history.com/topics/inventions/printing-press>.

⁹ Jacob Soll, “The Long and Brutal History of Fake News,” *POLITICO Magazine* (POLITICO LLC, December 18, 2016), <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/fake-news-history-long-violent-214535>.

of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda.¹⁰ With the help of this ministry, Hitler successfully managed to control and manipulate all forms of state media.¹¹ Concurrently, the Soviet Union launched its very own disinformation office in 1923, which came at the request of Józef Unszlicht, Deputy Chairman of the KGB.¹² Under this initiative, the KGB was credited with the creation of the word *dezinformatsiya* which we have come to know as *disinformation*.¹³ Subsequently, in the decades following, the People’s Republic of China underwent the Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Communist Party of China, which aimed to erase the “four olds” or the concepts of old ideas, old things, old customs, and old habits.¹⁴ It was under this jarring transition that the People’s Republic of China began an internal campaign on rewriting its past so that it could begin to alter the narrative of its future.

While the scale of disinformation seen within the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election may be alarming to the government of the United States and its citizens, historical context utilization allows us to better understand the severity of recent events in relation to the century’s old phenomenon. But most importantly, let this serve as a reminder to reflect upon the past with the intent of better understanding how to predict the future, so that we may continue to safeguard the long-lasting prosperity of our democracy and our great nation as we proceed to enter into the unknown.

¹⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, “Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment,” Ushmm.org (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019), <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ministry-of-propaganda-and-public-enlightenment>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Martin J Manning, Herbert Romerstein, and Martin Manning, *Historical Dictionary of American Propaganda*, ed. James Olson (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Tillman Durdin, “China Transformed by Elimination of ‘Four Olds’,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/05/19/archives/china-transformed-by-elimination-of-four-olds.html>.

Focus of Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the threat posed by an increase in offensive disinformation campaigns by Russia and China which aim to destabilize the international community and negatively influence domestic politics in the United States. This thesis provides information regarding the domestic systems that enable both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping to exercise control over mass media with the goal of rewriting the narrative of current events to better advance their personal agendas. Through the use of publicly available information, this study will bring to light the growing 21st-century threat while offering suggestions for how the United States can best proceed in effectively combating it under the Presidency of President-elect Joe Biden.

Russian Disinformation Efforts

“We will never know whether the Russian intervention was determinative in such a close election. ... What does matter is this: The Russians successfully meddled in our democracy and our intelligence agencies have concluded they will do so again.”¹⁵

- Democratic Representative Adam Schiff

Origins of State-Backed Meddling

To better understand the events that have recently unfolded in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, I will begin by isolating the effects of disinformation as fueled only by the Kremlin. Reflecting on events prior to 2016, it is worth noting that Russia underwent its own 2012 Presidential election and for the first time the international community saw Vladimir Putin reportedly adopt an aggressive “trolling” campaign against his political opponents in the months leading up to the election.¹⁶ This was a never before seen offensive strategy aimed at utilizing “trolls,” or Kremlin-backed accounts, on various social media platforms to persuade voters through consistent exposure to state-funded smear campaigns that aimed to delegitimize Putin’s opponent, Gennady Zyuganov.¹⁷ It was through this successful experimentation that the Kremlin had realized that the previous strategy of attempting to influence political leaders within the United States through mass “phishing” attempts as reported in the years prior to the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election was far less effective than utilizing Kremlin-funded “bots” and “trolls” to

¹⁵ Reuters Staff, “Key Quotes from Congress’ Hearing on Russia and the U.S. Election,” *Reuters*, March 20, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-russia-factbox/key-quotes-from-congress-hearing-on-russia-and-the-u-s-election-idUSKBN16R229>.

¹⁶ Select Committee on Intelligence - United States Senate, “SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE UNITED STATES SENATE ON RUSSIAN ACTIVE MEASURES CAMPAIGNS AND INTERFERENCE IN THE 2016 U.S. ELECTION,” *United States Senate - Intelligence*, vol. Volume 2: RUSSIA’S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA WITH ADDITIONAL VIEWS (Washington D.C.: United States Senate, 2019), https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

target and influence American voters.¹⁸ It was through Putin’s domestic efforts, that the Kremlin was able to adopt a more technically advanced playbook as it narrowed its focus on the upcoming U.S. election.

Russia and the 2016 Election

And as the 2016 U.S. presidential election took shape, we witnessed a growing domestic divide among American voters on certain key topics such as immigration policy, oppression against minorities, and second amendment rights. This divide was only fueled by a growing vocalization of extreme political views that countered the opposing party’s ideology. These polarized posts had higher user interaction rates since they were being circulated by users more often, thus making them appear in the social media algorithm as more popular because of users supporting or objecting to the extreme content within the post.¹⁹ We later learned that platforms such as Facebook then implemented the practice of data mining to analyze and build refined profiles of each user based on how they would interact with the content.²⁰ This allowed artificial intelligence to feed certain posts to the user based on their unique data metric profiles.²¹ It did not take long for private companies and international adversaries to exploit the opportunity to use the data profiles gathered on millions of Facebook users and start feeding information into these

¹⁸ Marie Baezner and Robin Patrice, “Hotspot Analysis: Cyber-Conflict between the United States of America and Russia (Volume 1),” *Center for Security Studies (CSS)* (Zürich: ETH Zürich, June 2017), <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/Cyber-Reports-2017-02.pdf>.

¹⁹ Ivan Garibay et al., “Polarization in Social Media Assists Influencers to Become More Influential: Analysis and Two Inoculation Strategies,” *Scientific Reports* 9, no. 1 (December 9, 2019): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-55178-8>.

²⁰ Natasha Singer, “What You Don’t Know About How Facebook Uses Your Data,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/11/technology/facebook-privacy-hearings.html>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

polarized “echo chambers,” or like-minded communities that strategically filter opposing views through an algorithm.²²

As reported by the Senate Committee on Intelligence’s second report on Russian campaign interference in 2016, the digital advertising expenses for the 2016 election increased by 789 percent or \$1.4 billion over what had been reported in the 2012 election.²³ With greater insight into the behavioral data on countless social media users, not only did political candidates identify an opportunity to advance their unique narratives with the hopes of being elected, but Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA) also tapped into this information to target voters in an attempt to discredit candidates at multiple levels on both sides if they opposed the Kremlin.²⁴

The Kremlin in doing this had identified a critical flaw that tech giants could not mitigate and it proved to be an unanticipated threat. As social media became further politicized and used by voters for accessing news leading up to the 2016 election, it has exposed a vulnerability that allowed the once free flow of information between Americans to become manipulated and diluted by those with ill intent in the broader international community.²⁵ This paved way for a newfound tactic within the art of psychological warfare. As Christopher Wylie, a former Cambridge Analytica employee explained, “If you’re trying to hack a person’s mind, you need to identify cognitive biases and then exploit them.”²⁶ The Kremlin would prove to do just that by introducing a new form of hybrid warfare.

²² Kartik Hosanagar, “Blame the Echo Chamber on Facebook. But Blame Yourself, Too,” *WIRED* (WIRED, November 25, 2016), <https://www.wired.com/2016/11/facebook-echo-chamber/>.

²³ Select Committee on Intelligence - United States Senate, “SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE UNITED STATES SENATE ON RUSSIAN ACTIVE MEASURES CAMPAIGNS AND INTERFERENCE IN THE 2016 U.S. ELECTION,” *United States Senate - Intelligence*, vol. Volume 2: RUSSIA’S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA WITH ADDITIONAL VIEWS (Washington D.C.: United States Senate, 2019), https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Christopher Wylie, *MINDF*CK : Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America*. (S.L.: Random House, 2019).

The Design of Russian Disinformation Entities

To adopt and successfully implement this strategy of hybrid warfare, the Kremlin undertook a two-pronged approach to influence the 2016 election. It focused the first prong on the utilization of the Internet Research Agency (IRA), and the second prong relied on the aggressive execution by the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff (GRU) cyber units. The IRA based out of St. Petersburg had developed a broad “information warfare” strategy as early as 2014, but this strategy had shifted to support President Trump in the months leading up to the election.²⁷ The GRU is the foreign military intelligence agency that reports directly to the Minister of Defense and the Chief of the General Staff.²⁸ Under the operations of the GRU in 2016 were Units 26165 and 74455, which were cyber operations units that directly targeted the computer networks of the presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton.²⁹ Through these coordinated efforts, the GRU had successfully accessed private information and leaked sensitive information that attacked the legitimacy of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election.³⁰

Early Signs of a Growing Russian Threat

It is important to note that the offensive cyber operations of the GRU had coincided with various meetings between the Russian government and Trump Campaign officials.³¹ While there was no substantial evidence that could have established that the Trump Campaign conspired or

²⁷ Robert Mueller III, “Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election (Vol. 1),” *U.S. Department of Justice Storage* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, March 2019), <https://www.justice.gov/storage/report.pdf>.

²⁸ Guy Faulconbridge, “What Is Russia’s GRU Military Intelligence Agency?,” *Reuters* (Reuters, October 5, 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-russia-gru-factbox/what-is-russias-gru-military-intelligence-agency-idUSKCN1MF1VK>.

²⁹ Robert Mueller III, “Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election (Vol. 1),” *U.S. Department of Justice Storage* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, March 2019), <https://www.justice.gov/storage/report.pdf>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

coordinated with the Russian government in the state-sponsored actions aimed at disrupting the 2016 election, it is worth noting that the Kremlin had a clear bias in favor of Donald Trump which dated back to as early as 2015.³² This begs the question of whether the Kremlin had an authentic existing respect towards President Trump or if the Kremlin had early on identified an opportunity to utilize the controversial relationship with President Trump to further sow discord among the American people.

Before 2016, the United States had been aware of a growing cyber threat from opposing powers such as Russia. As noted within the Director of National Intelligence's 2015 Worldwide Threat Assessment, the United States knew that Russia was gaining confidence in utilizing information warfare to combat the spread of democratic ideology and influence in the international community as top officials saw in Ukraine.³³ However, the United States did not adequately prepare for the sophisticated disinformation capabilities of the Russian state, which primarily targeted the American voters rather than the infrastructure of the polls or networks of politicians. Sources report that as early as 2014, the Obama administration had received preemptive warning about a growing threat posed by the growing offensive capabilities of the Kremlin, however, the State Department feared the potential retaliation that would follow from taking a more aggressive counter to the growing threats.³⁴ A former official of the Obama administration noted that there were several options under consideration to convey a strong message of condemnation to the Kremlin.³⁵ However, these options failed to be further pursued

³² *Ibid.*

³³ James R Clapper, "Statement for the Record Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community Senate Armed Services Committee," *Office of the Director of National Intelligence* (Washington D.C.: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2015), https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Unclassified_2015_ATA_SFR_-_SASC_FINAL.pdf.

³⁴ Ali Watkins, "Obama Team Was Warned in 2014 about Russian Interference," *POLITICO* (POLITICO LLC, August 14, 2017), <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/14/obama-russia-election-interference-241547>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

out of fear for the safety of diplomatic staff and defense attaches rather than the intelligence operatives who would be carrying out a majority of the proposed actions.³⁶

The Aftermath of 2016

While the extent to which the Kremlin meddled in the 2016 United States presidential election can not be decisively quantified, it can be confidently argued that there was significant meddling within the electoral process. For example, “In 2016, Russian agents posted just under 30,000 times on Facebook, yet the operation generated almost 13 million shares, 15 million likes, and 1.3 million comments, according to a research team at Oxford University.”³⁷ And they displayed disinformation material directly on the Facebook timelines of over one-third of the U.S. population or 126 million users, according to the testimony by Facebook’s general counsel.³⁸ Additionally, Twitter reported, “that in the 10 weeks before the election some 3,814 Internet Research Agency accounts interacted with 1.4 million people,” and an additional 50,528 automated bot accounts had tweeted regarding the election which could have reached an even broader audience.³⁹ It is important to keep in mind that the above statistics are limited to the reach of disinformation on Facebook and Twitter, and evidence suggests that the Kremlin launched similar campaigns across various other platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Philip Elliott, “The Mueller Report Doesn’t Call Into Question Trump’s 2016 Win,” *Time* (TIME USA, April 18, 2019), <https://time.com/5573537/mueller-report-russia-election-interference/>.

³⁸ Elizabeth Weise, “Russian Fake Accounts Showed Posts to 126 Million Facebook Users,” *USA TODAY* (USA TODAY, October 30, 2017), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2017/10/30/russian-fake-accounts-showed-posts-126-million-facebook-users/815342001/>.

³⁹ Scott Shane and Mark Mazzetti, “The Plot to Subvert an Election: Unraveling the Russia Story So Far (Published 2018),” *The New York Times*, September 20, 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/09/20/us/politics/russia-interference-election-trump-clinton.html?mtrref=www.google.com>.

However, the Kremlin’s support of international disinformation campaigns has not stopped at the 2016 presidential election. The Department of Justice continues to unravel various pieces of evidence that point towards a continuation of these campaigns, despite several notable indictments of Russian nationals and Russian entities.

In 2018, the Department of Justice indicted Elena Alekseevna Khusyaynova, a Russian national charged with aiding a possibly state-backed aggressive disinformation media campaign during the 2016 presidential elections and beyond. This became officially known as “Project Lakhta”.⁴⁰ It is important to note that Elena Khusyaynova had received funding from Yevgeniy Viktorovich Prigozhin, a close ally of Vladimir Putin, who funded the infamous Internet Research Agency (IRA).⁴¹ It is noted by Yevgeny Vyshenkov, an affiliate of Prigozhin that, “Yevgeny Prigozhin believes he is the Czar’s right hand.”⁴² Within the official complaint, the Department of Justice provides evidence for continued social media influence between December 2016 and May 2018.⁴³ The evidence shows several attempts by the conspirators to target radical groups through social media campaigns that manipulated the narratives of various societal topics within the United States.⁴⁴

In order to lend credibility to the conspirators who aimed to target American social media users, the conspirators behind Project Lakhta had covertly adopted falsified personas of

⁴⁰ United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, *United States of America v. ELENA ALEKSEEVNA KHUSYAYNOVA* (United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia September 28, 2018).

⁴¹ Amanda Macias and Mike Calia, “Trump Administration Sanctions ‘Putin’s Chef,’ Other Russians over 2016 Election Hacking,” *CNBC* (CNBC LLC, March 15, 2018), <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/15/treasury-sanctions-putins-chef-other-russians-over-cyber-related-threats.html>.

⁴² Thomas Grove, “Kremlin Caterer Accused in U.S. Election Meddling Has History of Dishing Dark Arts,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 2018, sec. US, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/kremlin-caterer-accused-in-u-s-election-meddling-has-history-of-dishing-dark-arts-1518823765>.

⁴³ United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, *United States of America v. ELENA ALEKSEEVNA KHUSYAYNOVA* (United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia September 28, 2018).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

American activists.⁴⁵ It was through these accounts that conspirators had utilized advanced analytic products to target users with aggressive social media advertising campaigns.⁴⁶ The intricacy behind Project Lakhta went as far as to acquire U.S. based computer network space in order to utilize virtual private networks (VPN's) that would allow for the specialists to access the U.S. network from anywhere in the world.⁴⁷ The funds required to launch such a large scale offensive campaign were managed by Elena Alekseevna Khusyaynova, who sat at the center of this particular Department of Justice led investigation and indictment.⁴⁸ The evidence suggests that Khusyaynova requested the necessary funds for Project Lakhta from Concord Management and Consulting, an organization owned by Yevgeniy Viktorovich Prigozhin.⁴⁹ It was through these requests that Concord affiliates wired vague or misrepresented funds directly to Khusyaynova for Project Lakhta.⁵⁰

The U.S. Department of Justice had earlier indicted Yevgeniy Viktorovich Prigozhin on 16 February 2018 under the rule of a grand jury for his involvement with Project Lakhta and

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ United States District Court for the District of Columbia, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA v. INTERNET RESEARCH AGENCY LLC * A/K/A MEDIASINTEZ LLC A/K/A * GLAVSET LLC A/K/A MIXINFO * LLC A/K/A AZIMUT LLC A/K/A * NOVINFO LLC, * CONCORD MANAGEMENT AND * CONSULTING LLC, * CONCORD CATERING, * YEVGENIY VIKTOROVICH * PRIGOZHIN, * MIKHAIL IVANOVICH BYSTROV, * MIKHAIL LEONIDOVICH BURCHIK * A/K/A MIKHAIL ABRAMOV, * ALEKSANDRA YURYEVNA * KRYLOVA, * ANNA VLADISLAVOVNA * BOGACHEV A, * SERGEY PAVLOVICH POLOZOV, * MARIA ANATOLYEVNA BOVDA * A/K/A MARIA ANATOLYEVNA * BELYAEVA, * ROBERT SERGEYEVICH BOVDA, * DZHEYKHUN NASIMI OGLY * ASLANOV A/K/A JAYHOON * ASLANOV A/K/A JAY ASLANOV, * VADIM VLADIMIROVICH * PODKOPAEV, * GLEB IGOREVICH VASILCHENKO, * IRINA VIKTOROVNA KAVERZINA, * and * VLADIMIR VENKOV. (United States District Court for the District of Columbia February 16, 2018).

⁴⁸ United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, *United States of America v. ELENA ALEKSEEVNA KHUSYAYNOVA* (United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia September 28, 2018).

⁴⁹ Neil MacFarquhar, "Yevgeny Prigozhin, Russian Oligarch Indicted by U.S., Is Known as 'Putin's Cook,'" *The New York Times*, February 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/16/world/europe/prigozhin-russia-indictment-mueller.html>.

⁵⁰ United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, *United States of America v. ELENA ALEKSEEVNA KHUSYAYNOVA* (United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia September 28, 2018).

Concord Management and Consulting.⁵¹ The evidence obtained by the Department of Justice shows that by 2016, Concord Management and Consulting was funding the operating expenses of Project Lakhta with a monthly budget of over 1,250,000 U.S. Dollars.⁵² These funds fueled the rapid circulation of disinformation across American social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, with ease. However, despite his indictment, Prigozhin remains an unmanaged threat and resides within the borders of Russia.

President Trump’s Response to Russia

As the U.S. Department of Justice continues to utilize evidence from the U.S. Intelligence Community that links offensive acts carried out on behalf of Russian agents, oligarchs, and officials, Vladimir Putin vehemently has condemned on multiple occasions the claim of Russian interference in the 2016 election. During an interview with Fox News anchor Chirs Wallace, Putin stated, “Do you really believe that someone acting from the Russian territory could have influenced the United States and influenced the choice of millions of Americans? This is utterly ridiculous.”⁵³ The consistent denial of involvement by Putin has only been supported by the remarks of President Trump, as seen during a moderated discussion in Helsinki, Finland when the President states, “My people came to me — Dan Coats came to me and some others — they

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² United States District Court for the District of Columbia, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA v. INTERNET RESEARCH AGENCY LLC * A/K/A MEDIASINTEZ LLC A/K/A * GLAVSET LLC A/K/A MIXINFO * LLC A/K/A AZIMUT LLC A/K/A * NOVINFO LLC, * CONCORD MANAGEMENT AND * CONSULTING LLC, * CONCORD CATERING, * YEVGENIY VIKTOROVICH * PRIGOZHIN, * MIKHAIL IVANOVICH BYSTROV, * MIKHAIL LEONIDOVICH BURCHIK * A/K/A MIKHAIL ABRAMOV, * ALEKSANDRA YURYEVA * KRYLOVA, * ANNA VLADISLAVOVNA * BOGACHEV A, * SERGEY PAVLOVICH POLOZOV, * MARIA ANATOLYEVA BOVDA * A/K/A MARIA ANATOLYEVA * BELYAEVA, * ROBERT SERGEYEVICH BOVDA, * DZHEYKHUN NASIMI OGLY * ASLANOV A/K/A JAYHOON * ASLANOV A/K/A JAY ASLANOV, * VADIM VLADIMIROVICH * PODKOPAEV, * GLEB IGOREVICH VASILCHENKO, * IRINA VIKTOROVNA KAVERZINA, * and * VLADIMIR VENKOV. (United States District Court for the District of Columbia February 16, 2018).

⁵³ Max Greenwood, “Putin Refuses to Look at Mueller Indictment during Fox News Interview,” *TheHill.com* (The Hill, July 16, 2018), <https://thehill.com/policy/international/397318-putin-refuses-to-look-at-indictment-during-fox-news-interview>.

said they think it's Russia. I have President Putin; he just said it's not Russia. I will say this: I don't see any reason why it would be..."⁵⁴ These remarks provide a harsh contrast to the consistent stance of the U.S. Intelligence Community and undoubtedly has led to the creation of tension between the President, his security advisers, and the American people.

However, after an outcry by Democratic Party leaders for a lack of response by President Trump for Russian interference during the 2016 election, in March of 2018, the Treasury Department had placed sanctions on 24 Russian entities and individuals.⁵⁵ However, critics of the President remained upset by the failure to acknowledge Russian interference in 2016. Chuck Schumer, Senate minority leader, was quoted saying, "I say to President Trump, your silence speaks on this issue."⁵⁶

Russian Efforts Ahead of the 2020 Election

Given the lack of direct repercussions imposed on Russia for its attempt to influence the 2016 election, many expected to see the Kremlin display a willingness to further push the limits of what the U.S. government will tolerate. Beginning in February of 2018, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson provided a warning on early-stage Russian interference within the upcoming midterm elections.⁵⁷ In July of 2018, Microsoft went public with evidence showing Russian hackers had

⁵⁴ President Trump Vladimir Putin, Remarks by President Trump and President Putin of the Russian Federation in Joint Press Conference, *The White House*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-putin-russian-federation-joint-press-conference/>.

⁵⁵ Elana Schor, Andrew Restuccia, and Cory Bennett, "US Imposes New Sanctions on Russian Entities over 2016 Election Meddling," *POLITICO* (POLITICO, March 15, 2018), <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-russia-us-imposes-new-sanctions-on-over-2016-election-meddling/>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Doug Stanglin, "Russia Already Meddling in U.S. Midterm Elections, Tillerson Says," *USA TODAY* (USA TODAY, February 7, 2018), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/02/07/tillerson-russians-already-meddling-u-s-midterm-elections/314560002/>.

attempted to launch a phishing page that targeted three congressional candidates.⁵⁸ And in December of 2018, Dan Coats, the Director of National Intelligence, conducted an investigation that concluded that Russia, alongside China and Iran, had successfully conducted influence campaigns during the 2018 midterm elections.⁵⁹ The actions taken by the Kremlin during the midterm elections were similar tactics to those of the 2016 election in terms of the disinformation strategy implemented across social media platforms.

More recently, there has been evidence that suggests that the IRA, which is linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin, remains active ahead of the 2020 Presidential election. Upon receiving a tip from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Facebook and Twitter uncovered several fake accounts that were directing users to a news site by the name of Peace Data, which was fed by Russian disinformation efforts.⁶⁰ However, this time the Russians had contracted out unwitting freelance American writers to create the news articles which were being published.⁶¹ While this attempt was intercepted by the U.S. government early on, it shows that the Kremlin has adopted a new approach to disinformation and it is attempting to direct social media users to state-backed “fringe websites” rather than solely relying on traditional social media posts.⁶² This proves that the threat of disinformation is continuing to evolve and further suggests the need for enhanced preventive measures to combat any offensive actions taken by a foreign adversary, such as Russia, prior to the 2020 election.

⁵⁸ Thomas Brewster, “Microsoft: Russian Hackers Are Targeting The Midterms,” *Forbes* (Forbes, July 20, 2018), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2018/07/20/russian-hackers-target-three-mid-term-candidates-says-microsoft/>.

⁵⁹ Julian E. Barnes, “Russians Tried, but Were Unable to Compromise Midterm Elections, U.S. Says (Published 2018),” *The New York Times*, December 21, 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/21/us/politics/russia-midterm-election-influence-coates.html>.

⁶⁰ Sheera Frenkel and Julian E. Barnes, “Russians Again Targeting Americans With Disinformation, Facebook and Twitter Say,” *The New York Times*, September 1, 2020, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/01/technology/facebook-russia-disinformation-election.html>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

In months leading up to the 2020 election, however, a whistleblower complaint by Brian Murphy, the former head of the Office of Intelligence and Analysis at DHS, disclosed on several occasions that there was attempted censorship of intelligence analysis relating to the Russian interference efforts.⁶³ Murphy outlines an instance in which David Glawe, the Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Homeland Security, had testified in 2018 on the matter to the House Committee on Homeland Security, but was then summoned to the White House and threatened to be fired by Secretary Nielsen at the orders of President Trump.⁶⁴ However, Glawe had managed to restore relations and return to his role but conveyed to Murphy that he would no longer be assisting him in matters that regard to Russian interference assessments.⁶⁵

In May 2020, Chad Wolf, the Acting Secretary of Homeland Security, was notified by Robert O'Brien, White House National Security Advisor, to have Brian Murphy shift his efforts from reporting on Russian interference to interference by China and Iran.⁶⁶ However, after continuing to report on Russian disinformation, Murphy was told by Wolf in a closed-door meeting to hold back further reports as this topic "made the President look bad".⁶⁷ Afterward, Murphy asserts that he was excluded from future briefings and a leaked analysis allegedly misreported intelligence and downplayed the current threat presented by Russia ahead of the election.⁶⁸

⁶³ House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, "Whistleblower Reprisal Complaint: MURPHY, BRIAN PRINCIPAL DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY OFFICE OF INTELLIGENCE & ANALYSIS," *House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence* (Washington D.C.: DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL, September 8, 2020), https://intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/murphy_wb_dhs_oig_complaint9.8.20.pdf.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

As the United States 2020 presidential election is underway, the public is now aware of the existing disinformation and cyber threat capabilities of opposing superpowers such as Russia and China. However, many remain skeptical of our preparedness given the postponement of the Director of National Intelligence's Worldwide Threat Assessment, which typically outlines high-level initiatives and assessments set forth by the U.S. Intelligence Community. To complicate any preexisting threat of foreign adversaries targeting the 2020 United States presidential election, we are now working to combat an unprecedented global pandemic stemming from the virus, COVID-19.

Since the conclusion of the 2016 presidential election, we have undoubtedly experienced the continuation of an advancing polarization between the two major political parties and their followers within the United States. And this growing divide has only been amplified by the rise of the 'Information Age' and the growing user interaction across all major social media platforms.⁶⁹ As we continue to see an upward trend in the percentage of Americans who turn to social media to formulate their views and voice their opinions, are we willingly serving as accomplices in our adversaries' pursuit to delegitimize the western democratic system?

⁶⁹ "Definition of Information Age," *Merriam-webster.com* (Merriam-Webster, 2019), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Information%20Age>.

Chinese Disinformation Efforts

“They’re calculating. They’re persistent. They’re patient. And they’re not subject to the righteous constraints of an open, democratic society or the rule of law.”⁷⁰

- Christopher Wray, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation

Origins of State-Backed Meddling

The increase in disinformation campaigns can not be solely attributed to the Russian government, as we have recently begun to see the Chinese government follow suit in particular since 2016. Reflecting on the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), it is important to note that the Chinese government has been controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since its creation in 1949.⁷¹ Since then, the state has clearly placed its focus on establishing a firm hold over three main pillars: “control of personnel, propaganda, and the People’s Liberation Army”.⁷² While the significant efforts directed towards controlling these three pillars have shaped the day-to-day functionality of the Chinese domestic politics, it has arguably distorted the party’s view on how to effectively cultivate respect in the international community. However, can the party’s long-standing domestic agenda be solely to blame for what appears to be increasingly aggressive offensive actions taken in the international community on behalf of the Chinese state?

⁷⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “The Threat Posed by the Chinese Government and the Chinese Communist Party to the Economic and National Security of the United States,” *Federal Bureau of Investigation* (Federal Bureau of Investigation, July 7, 2020), <https://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches/the-threat-posed-by-the-chinese-government-and-the-chinese-communist-party-to-the-economic-and-national-security-of-the-united-states>.

⁷¹ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Chinese Communist Party | Political Party, China,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 18, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chinese-Communist-Party>.

⁷² Eleanor Albert, Beina Xu, and Lindsay Maizland, “The Chinese Communist Party,” *Council on Foreign Relations* (Council on Foreign Relations, June 9, 2020), <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinese-communist-party>.

China's Growing Admiration Towards Russia

Over the course of the past five years, we have seen evidence that suggests a growing willingness of the Chinese government to exert overt and covert influence over territories that share a special relationship with the mainland, such as Taiwan and Hong Kong. Leading up to these questionable cases there has been both a rise in Russian disinformation campaigns and information warfare toward the Western world and a continued rapid development in relations between the Russian government and the Chinese government. As noted by Chinese President, Xi Jinping, ahead of a visit to Russia in July of 2019, "I have had closer interactions with President Putin than with any other foreign colleagues. He is my best and bosom friend. I cherish dearly our deep friendship."⁷³ Recently, the two countries have conducted several joint military training exercises with the most recent taking place in September of 2020 in southern Russia, just weeks before the U.S. Presidential Election and during the midst of the growing global pandemic.⁷⁴ The strengthening of the Chinese and Russian relationship has brought about several notable concerns from political figures and academics alike, which can be captured by the remarks of Thomas Joscelyn of the Foundation for Defense of Democracy, "the Xi-Putin partnership is arguably the most dangerous relationship on the planet today."⁷⁵

While at first glance it may appear that these two countries are focused on two different political agendas which could possibly limit a future need for international cooperation between the two states, this is not necessarily the case. If we draw our attention to the aspirations of these

⁷³ Global Times - Xinhua, "Xi Tells Russian Media He Cherishes Deep Friendship with Putin - Global Times," www.globaltimes.cn (Global Times, June 5, 2019), <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1153186.shtml>.

⁷⁴ CBS/AP, "China Says It Will Join Russian Military Exercises This Month along with Iran, Belarus and Others," *Www.Cbsnews.Com*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/china-russia-military-exercises-war-games-caucasus-2020-with-iran-belarus-pakistan-myanmar/>.

⁷⁵ Doug Bandow, "Why America Should Fear a Russia-China Alliance," *CATO Institute* (CATO Institute, September 9, 2020), <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/why-america-should-fear-russia-china-alliance>.

two superpowers when it comes to 21st-century foreign affairs, we can identify a mutual desire to diminish the standing of the United States in hopes of restoring the previously held respect among their given geopolitical spheres of influence. As identified within the Secretary of Defense's annual report to Congress on the military and security developments of the People's Republic of China (PRC's), it is stated that PRC has set forth a strategy that is focused on "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049.⁷⁶ One of the ways that the state has recently evolved to achieve this ambitious goal is by the adoption and aggressive implementation of a "sharp power" approach, a term which has been coined by the National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum for Democratic Studies.⁷⁷ This term can be defined as, "an approach to international affairs that typically involves efforts at censorship and the use of manipulation to degrade the integrity of independent institutions."⁷⁸ While the CPP has managed to assert its influence over the flow of information domestically, it now seeks to aggressively expand its state-led censorship and manipulative disinformation capabilities to the international community, similar to Russia. In doing so, the CCP aims to condition the minds of foreign entities into accepting the altered narrative that originates from the party leadership in Beijing.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Office of the Secretary of Defense, "OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China i," *U.S. Department of Defense* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2020), <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

⁷⁷ Christopher Walker, "China's Foreign Influence and Sharp Power Strategy to Shape and Influence Democratic Institutions," *National Endowment for Democracy* (National Endowment for Democracy, May 16, 2016), <https://www.ned.org/chinas-foreign-influence-and-sharp-power-strategyto-shape-and-influence-democratic-institutions/>.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, "OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China i," *U.S. Department of Defense* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2020), <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

With control over the foreign perspective and the financial means to influence global markets, the PRC has begun to establish itself as a global leader.⁸⁰

However, the PRC realizes that in order to advance its desired standing within the international community, it must further destabilize the country that is currently limiting its ability to be seen as the top superpower, the United States. And in the year of a growing global pandemic and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, China has proven eager to jump at the opportunity to further expose an existing domestic vulnerability among the American people with the hopes of discrediting Western democracy, similar to Russia. However, the CCP's approach differs from that of the Kremlin, as the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence has identified that China prefers the election of Democratic nominee and former Vice President Joe Biden, who offers a chance at moderating current Trump-backed criticisms against the PRC.⁸¹ While the CCP has made its presidential preferences clear, it can be argued that the PRC benefits from launching disinformation campaigns in support of, or against, both sides.⁸² As stated by a notable Chinese-American, Pastor Bob Fu, who recently has found himself facing death threats from supporters of the CCP, "With such a large-scale disinformation campaign, you don't really have to think of this as beneficial to either candidate. The information operation is meant to cause confusion and chaos for the American electorate and hurt both

⁸⁰ Kathy Gilsinan, "How China Is Planning to Win Back the World," *The Atlantic*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/china-disinformation-propaganda-united-states-xi-jinping/612085/>.

⁸¹ NCSC DIRECTOR WILLIAM EVANIA, "Statement by NCSC Director William Evanina: Election Threat Update for the American Public," www.dni.gov (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, August 7, 2020), <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/item/2139-statement-by-ncsc-director-william-evanina-election-threat-update-for-the-american-public>.

⁸² Josh Rogin, "Opinion | There's Chinese Interference on Both Sides of the 2020 Election," *Washington Post*, October 29, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/theres-chinese-interference-on-both-sides-of-the-2020-election/2020/10/29/49f90dfe-1a2c-11eb-82db-60b15c874105_story.html.

sides.”⁸³ If this is indeed representative of the CCP’s strategy, it displays Beijing’s forward-thinking in shaping the future of great power politics.⁸⁴

China’s Disinformation Entities

In order to best understand the forms in which the PRC is implementing its sharp power approach, it is important to understand the state-backed entities that serve as the driving force behind domestic and international information campaigns. Similar to the Russian military’s Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff (GRU), the PRC has established the People’s Liberation Army’s Strategic Support Force (SSF). The SSF holds the Network Systems Department which is largely responsible for the PRC’s “cyberwarfare, technical reconnaissance, electronic warfare, and psychological warfare” operations carried out against foreign entities.⁸⁵ It is worth noting that the SSF is the only known psychological warfare focused entity within the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA).⁸⁶ With this knowledge, the U.S. Department of Defense has defined the intent of the PLA’s psychological operations mission as one that aims to disrupt and influence the public narrative of the international community with the intent of advancing the interests of the PRC.⁸⁷

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Kathy Gilsinan, “How China Is Planning to Win Back the World,” *The Atlantic*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/china-disinformation-propaganda-united-states-xi-jinping/612085/>

⁸⁵ Office of the Secretary of Defense, “OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China i,” *U.S. Department of Defense* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2020), <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

China and the Fight to Control Hong Kong

Considering the recent events that have taken place in Hong Kong in mid to late 2019, there is an apparent state-sponsored suppression of the citizens' and reporters' voices across several virtual domains. The unrest in Hong Kong began in June of 2019 as plans of an extradition bill came to light, which would allow for citizens of Hong Kong to be extradited to mainland China for legal prosecution.⁸⁸ Protesters feared that this would give China the ability to assert control over a semi-autonomous territory, which is currently identified as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the PRC.⁸⁹ Following July 1, 1997, China was once again granted sovereignty over Hong Kong by the British after the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong.⁹⁰ However, in return for the PRC's resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong, the PRC agreed to abide by the Basic Law which outlines the concept of 'one country, two systems' and provides a constitutional framework to preserve the freedoms of Hong Kong's governing body and its people.⁹¹ However, in light of recent events, the people of Hong Kong feel that the mainland is trying to exercise unlawful influence over its unique system.

These fears had motivated hundreds of thousands of citizens to take to the streets of Hong Kong. After weeks of unrest, Hong Kong's legislature had decided to officially withdraw the highly debated extradition bill.⁹² However, citizens continued to take to the streets with the "five

⁸⁸ BBC Editor, "The Hong Kong Protests Explained in 100 and 500 Words," *BBC News*, November 28, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49317695>.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*; People Republic of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region," *www.fmprc.gov.cn* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ljzg_665465/zgjk_665467/3572_665469/t17814.shtml.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ GovHK, "GovHK: Fact Sheets," *www.gov.hk* (GovHK, July 2020), <https://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/factsheets/>.

⁹² BBC Editor, "Hong Kong Formally Scraps Extradition Bill That Sparked Protests," *BBC News*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-50150853>.

demands, not one less” campaign that aimed to promote further pro-democratic reform within the HKSAR.⁹³ After several violent clashes between protesters and law enforcement, Yang Guang, a spokesman for the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office of the Chinese government, promoted the protestors as “brazen, violent and criminal actors”.⁹⁴ Which was then followed by an implicit verbal warning from Beijing that urged protestors to not underestimate the strength and power of the central government.⁹⁵

With the hopes of controlling the narrative of events unfolding in the HKSAR, the PRC took an aggressive two-pronged disinformation approach that aimed to control the way in which the citizens within mainland China and the international community perceived the ongoing events. When it came time to execute this particular disinformation campaign domestically, it was executed with ease due to the fact that the party has blocked access to Twitter, Facebook, and Google for the mainland citizens of the PRC.⁹⁶ Consequently, the citizens are limited to the news that is shared on the state-backed platforms, Weibo, which is supposed to replicate a more censored version of Twitter, and WeChat, which is aimed at replicating a popularized Facebook application by the name of WhatsApp.⁹⁷ It is through these platforms that the CPP managed to launch several campaigns that villainized the HKSAR protestors and projected them as radical

⁹³ Amnesty International Editor, “Hong Kong Protests Explained,” *Amnesty.org* (Amnesty International, 2019), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/hong-kong-protests-explained/>.

⁹⁴ Christy Choi, “Hong Kong Protesters and Chinese Officials Hold Rival Press Conferences,” *The Guardian* (The Guardian, August 6, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/06/masked-hong-kongers-democracy-china-thugs>.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Arjun Kharpal, “An App That Let Chinese Users Bypass the Great Firewall and Access Google, Facebook Has Disappeared,” *CNBC* (CNBC, October 11, 2020), <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/12/chinese-app-that-let-users-access-google-facebook-has-disappeared.html>.

⁹⁷ BBC Editor, “Social Media and Censorship in China: How Is It Different to the West?,” *Bbc.co.uk* (BBC News, September 26, 2017), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/41398423/social-media-and-censorship-in-china-how-is-it-different-to-the-west>.

separatists who aimed to degrade the unity of the PRC.⁹⁸ One of the more notable discussion threads on Weibo was titled “Protect Hong Kong, firmly say no to violence” and this thread managed to accumulate over one million comments that largely backed state intervention against protestors in the HKSAR.⁹⁹

However, the PRC aimed to control narrative beyond the state and in order to accomplish this, it became clear that these disinformation campaigns would have to be replicated across Western social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook. After careful investigation, Twitter had reported in an official statement that it had suspended approximately 200,000 accounts that, “... were deliberately and specifically attempting to sow political discord in Hong Kong, including undermining the legitimacy... of the protest on the ground.”¹⁰⁰ Of these approximately 200,000 Twitter accounts, a minimum of 936 of them had originated from the PRC and others likely accessed the platform through VPNs.¹⁰¹ Additionally, Facebook had reported in an official statement that it had removed 5 Facebook accounts, 3 Facebook Groups, and 7 Facebook Pages from the platform due to the posting of disinformation on matters relating to Hong Kong and origins that traced back to PRC government officials.¹⁰² Facebook estimates that these Facebook Pages had roughly a combined total of 15,000 followers and that the Facebook Groups had a combined total of 2,200 joiners.¹⁰³

In one final push to control the narrative stemming from events in Hong Kong, the top legislature in China had enacted a new national security law for the HKSAR in July of 2020,

⁹⁸ Lily Kuo, “Beijing’s New Weapon to Muffle Hong Kong Protests: Fake News,” *The Guardian* (The Guardian, August 11, 2019),

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/11/hong-kong-china-unrest-beijing-media-response>.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Twitter Safety, “Information Operations Directed at Hong Kong,” *blog.twitter.com* (Twitter, August 19, 2019), https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/information_operations_directed_at_Hong_Kong.html.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Nathaniel Gleicher, “Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From China,” *About Facebook* (Facebook, August 19, 2019), <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/08/removing-cib-china/>.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

which outlined new guidance for the interpretation and punishments of crimes that can be classified under “secession”, “subversion”, “terrorism” and “collusion with foreign forces.”¹⁰⁴ The new national security law placed on the HKSAR comes at a time of uncertainty as clashes between protestors and state police forces continue to rage on in the city.¹⁰⁵ In the eyes of Jeff Wasserstrom, a historian of modern China at the University of California, Irvine, this move further endangers the sovereignty of the territory, as police forces have been presented with an even greater degree of autonomy to move forward with unlawful arrests of those who speak out against the PRC and CPP.¹⁰⁶ Consequently, it can be predicted that this will only further limit the freedom of speech of citizens across verbal and electronic mediums due to an increased fear of repercussion for voicing personal views. In response to the passing of this legislation, President Trump signed Executive Order 13936 which authorized the U.S. Government to impose sanctions on those responsible within PRC for passing the national security law, as this act has been perceived as a threat to the autonomy of the HKSAR and the national security of the United States.¹⁰⁷

Chinese Disinformation During a Global Pandemic

The widespread disinformation campaigns as seen within the cases of Hong Kong (HKSAR) and Taiwan serve as an alarming glimpse into the advancing capabilities of the PRC and arguably offer a grim warning to those who sit in the crosshairs of the party, such as the United States. As we find ourselves amidst a growing global pandemic, we have seen the rapid

¹⁰⁴ Anthony Kwan / Stringer, “Hong Kong’s National Security Law: 10 Things You Need to Know,” *www.amnesty.org* (Amnesty International, July 17, 2020), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/hong-kong-national-security-law-10-things-you-need-to-know/>.

¹⁰⁵ William Yang, “How China’s Influence Is Changing Hong Kong Protests | DW | 07.09.2020,” *DW.COM* (DW, July 9, 2020), <https://www.dw.com/en/chinas-influence-changing-hong-kong-protests/a-54842597>.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Susan V. Lawrence and Michael F. Martin, “China’s National Security Law for Hong Kong: Issues for Congress” (Washington D.C.: *Congressional Research Service*, August 3, 2020), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R46473.pdf>.

degradation of international relations, with respect to China, due to a lack of transparency and truth surrounding the origins and reporting of COVID-19.¹⁰⁸

Beginning in December, several Chinese doctors had begun to notice a strange occurrence of a virus that appeared similar to the earlier outbreak of the SARS-coronavirus epidemic, one of which was Doctor Li Wenliang.¹⁰⁹ As Dr. Li's worries began to grow, he attempted to share precautionary measures with fellow medical professionals.¹¹⁰ However, as word of this reached government officials, an official investigation was launched and Dr. Li was forced to sign a note that urged him to stop spreading false claims with an explicit threat of legal repercussion if these demands were not immediately enacted.¹¹¹ After several weeks, Dr. Li had fallen ill and passed away from complications caused by COVID-19, the virus that he had originally identified weeks prior.¹¹² However, prior to his unfortunate passing, Dr. Li had taken to the Chinese social media platform, Weibo, to share his story and further prove that the CCP had falsely denied any spread of infection across its state-monitored media platforms.¹¹³

Additionally, in January of 2020, China purposely withheld and prohibited the disclosure of data pertaining to COVID-19 to the World Health Organization (WHO) and instead held an abundance of closed door political meetings.¹¹⁴ Dr. Gauden Galea, the WHO's highest-ranking

¹⁰⁸ Jamie P. Horsley, "Let's End the COVID-19 Blame Game: Reconsidering China's Role in the Pandemic," ed. James Haynes, *Brookings* (Brookings, August 19, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/19/lets-end-the-covid-19-blame-game-reconsidering-chinas-role-in-the-pandemic/>.

¹⁰⁹ Nicholas Kristof, "Opinion | 'I Cannot Remain Silent,'" *The New York Times*, February 15, 2020, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/15/opinion/sunday/china-coronavirus.html>.

¹¹⁰ Stephanie Hegarty, "The Chinese Doctor Who Tried to Warn Others about Coronavirus," *BBC News*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51364382>.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Jamie P. Horsley, "Let's End the COVID-19 Blame Game: Reconsidering China's Role in the Pandemic," ed. James Haynes, *Brookings* (Brookings, August 19, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/19/lets-end-the-covid-19-blame-game-reconsidering-chinas-role-in-the-pandemic/>.

official in China, reported that “... they’re [the Chinese Government] giving it to us 15 minutes before it appears on CCTV.”¹¹⁵

And after weeks of developing widespread cases of COVID-19, a top Chinese official, and Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian had made the first notable attempt at deflecting responsibility for COVID-19’s proven origins in Wuhan, China.¹¹⁶ Within a tweet, Zhao Lijian, had raised suspicion to his more than 300,000 followers that the virus may have been brought into China from a U.S. Soldier.¹¹⁷ These false claims were quickly followed by an aggressive push back by President Trump, who notably referred to COVID-19 as the ‘Chinese virus’ across several press briefings and tweets.¹¹⁸ However, the efforts to rewrite the narrative of pandemic proved to be more widespread than the theory promoted by Zhao Lijian, as they continued to unfold. The Chinese government has chosen to clearly follow the Russian strategy of disinformation by attempting to confuse the general public by promoting differing theories across social media platforms and by utilizing state-backed accounts and figures to promote these messages to hundreds of thousands of users across the world.¹¹⁹

Beginning in late 2018, there had been only 17 official Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts across the platform but as of early 2020, there had been a sudden 370% growth in this number,

¹¹⁵ The Associated Press, “China Delayed Releasing Coronavirus Info, Frustrating WHO,” *AP NEWS* (The Associated Press, June 2, 2020), <https://apnews.com/article/3c061794970661042b18d5aeaaed9fae>.

¹¹⁶ Ben Westcott Westcott and Steven Jiang, “Chinese Diplomat Promotes Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory,” *CNN* (CNN, March 13, 2020),

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/13/asia/china-coronavirus-us-lijian-zhao-intl-hnk/index.html>. ; Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Dany Shoham, “Where Did COVID-19 Really Come From?,” Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, July 28, 2020),

<https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/covid19-origin/>.

¹¹⁷ Ben Westcott Westcott and Steven Jiang, “Chinese Diplomat Promotes Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory,” *CNN* (CNN, March 13, 2020),

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/13/asia/china-coronavirus-us-lijian-zhao-intl-hnk/index.html>.

¹¹⁸ Lily Kuo, “Trump Sparks Anger by Calling Coronavirus the ‘Chinese Virus,’” *The Guardian*, March 17, 2020, sec. World news,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/17/trump-calls-covid-19-the-chinese-virus-as-rift-with-coronavirus-beijing-escalates>.

¹¹⁹ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “China Adopts Russia’s Disinformation Playbook,” *Axios* (Axios, March 25, 2020), <https://www.axios.com/coronavirus-china-russia-disinformation-playbook-c49b6f3b-2a9a-47c1-9065-240121c9ceb2.html>.

marking over 80 official Chinese diplomatic accounts on the platform.¹²⁰ Evidence suggests that there could be a correlation in this sudden sharp growth to a meeting held on February 3rd, 2020 by Chinese President, Xi Jinping.¹²¹ It had been reported that one of the major talking points within this meeting focused on crafting a strategy for publicizing a narrative that highlighted the state's unity in the face of the growing pandemic.¹²² In the months following this meeting, Twitter experienced a surge in accounts that aimed to spread pro-Chinese disinformation across the platform and this consequently led to an investigation that successfully identified over 23,750 highly engaged state-backed accounts that were responsible for collectively tweeting 348,608 times.¹²³

Additionally, U.S. officials have recently grown aware that the PRC has unforeseen capabilities that allow for its reach to expand beyond the means of social media as frequently seen in past years.¹²⁴ During the early onset of the pandemic, the U.S. Intelligence Community had successfully identified that PRC operatives were behind an SMS disinformation campaign.¹²⁵ This campaign targeted a large population of the American public with exaggerated messages of a potential nationwide lockdown that would be enforced by the U.S. military.¹²⁶ While the exact reach of this campaign remains unreported, it appeared to be widespread enough to invoke a

¹²⁰ The Economist, "China Finds a Use Abroad for Twitter, a Medium It Fears at Home," *The Economist* (The Economist, February 20, 2020),

<https://www.economist.com/china/2020/02/20/china-finds-a-use-abroad-for-twitter-a-medium-it-fears-at-home>.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Donie O'Sullivan, "Twitter Deletes over 170,000 Accounts Linked to the Chinese Government," *CNN* (CNN, June 12, 2020), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/11/tech/twitter-manipulation-account-removal/index.html>.

¹²⁴ Edward Wong, Matthew Rosenberg, and Julian E. Barnes, "Chinese Agents Helped Spread Messages That Sowed Virus Panic in U.S., Officials Say," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/us/politics/coronavirus-china-disinformation.html>.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

statement refuting the false claims by the White House National Security Council via Twitter on March 15, 2020.¹²⁷

As clearly stated by Xu Zhangrun, a law professor in Beijing, “The coronavirus epidemic has revealed the rotten core of Chinese governance.”¹²⁸ The paper which outlines the criticism of the party posed by Xu, has since been banned but continues to circulate around the state through back-channel means.¹²⁹ Additionally, the disinformation surrounding the origins of COVID-19 has led more and more political scholars to grow increasingly skeptical over the means by which the Xi regime presides over the Chinese people, with most supporting the harsh criticisms of the party for recent actions and injustices.¹³⁰ As stated by Shadi Hamid, a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*, “... this pandemic should, finally, disabuse us of any remaining hope that the Chinese regime could be a responsible global actor. It is not, and it will not become one.”¹³¹

China’s Growing Focus on American Politics

Concurrently, as the international community faces growing uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, it is believed that the risk of foreign interference in the 2020 U.S. Presidential election remains heightened. And as the U.S. approached the 100-day countdown leading up to November 3rd, U.S. National Counterintelligence and Security Center Director, William Evanina, issued a statement regarding the Intelligence Community’s commitment to updating the

¹²⁷ Aaron Holmes, “Fake Text Messages Claiming the US Military Would Enforce a Country-Wide Lockdown Went Viral Last Month. They Were Spread by Chinese Agents, According to a New Report.,” *Business Insider*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/covid-19-lockdown-text-messages-hoax-spread-by-china-report-2020-4>.

¹²⁸ Nicholas Kristof, “Opinion | ‘I Cannot Remain Silent,’” *The New York Times*, February 15, 2020, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/15/opinion/sunday/china-coronavirus.html>.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Shadi Hamid, “China Is Avoiding Blame by Trolling the World,” *The Atlantic* (The Atlantic, March 19, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/china-trolling-world-and-avoiding-blame/608332/>.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

American people of any existing foreign threats ahead of election night.¹³² It was within this statement that Director Evanina explicitly identified that the PRC has taken an invested interest in shifting their disinformation efforts towards the American people in the months leading up to the U.S. Presidential election.¹³³ It was approximately three weeks later that Director Evanina went on record once again to reaffirm the strong belief that, “China has been expanding its influence efforts ahead of November 2020 to shape the policy environment in the United States, pressure political figures it views as opposed to China’s interests, and deflect and counter-criticism of China.”¹³⁴

Reports show that there have already been several attempts made to access information and spread disinformation on behalf of the PRC, ahead of Election Day 2020. In early September of 2020, Google released statements on a Chinese hackers’ attempt to access the personal email accounts of the Biden Campaign on multiple levels.¹³⁵ Later in the same month, Facebook wrote in a blog post that it ceased the continuation of an early stage disinformation campaign launched by the Chinese in an attempt to influence the political views of American citizens.¹³⁶ While at the current moment, evidence supporting this belief is limited due to the timing and the sensitive nature of intelligence gathering efforts leading up to the 2020 Presidential election, it is

¹³² NCSC Director William Evanina, “Statement by NCSC Director William Evanina: 100 Days Until Election 2020,” *www.dni.gov* (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, July 24, 2020), <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/item/2135-statement-by-ncsc-director-william-evanina-100-days-until-election-2020>.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ NCSC DIRECTOR WILLIAM EVANIA, “Statement by NCSC Director William Evanina: Election Threat Update for the American Public,” *www.dni.gov* (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, August 7, 2020), <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/item/2139-statement-by-ncsc-director-william-evanina-election-threat-update-for-the-american-public>.

¹³⁵ David E. Sanger and Nicole Perlroth, “Chinese Hackers Target Email Accounts of Biden Campaign Staff, Google Says,” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/us/politics/china-joe-biden-hackers.html>.

¹³⁶ Nathaniel Gleicher, “Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior,” *Facebook.com* (Facebook, September 22, 2020), <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/09/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-china-philippines/>.

imperative that we as a country identify the developing threat posed by the PRC and face it head-on with the full support of the international community.

These beliefs have since been echoed by not only top U.S. Intelligence Officials but also by the Intelligence Chief of the British Domestic Security Service (MI5), Ken McCallum.¹³⁷ It was during Chief McCallum's first media briefing that he analyzed the Russian and Chinese backed disinformation efforts as, "... Russia was like bad weather but China [is] a far greater challenge in the long-term and more like climate change."¹³⁸ While the level of threat posed by the PRC may remain unclear, it is apparent that the narrative posed by the U.S. government has appeared to be reciprocated by some of our notable allies across the globe, such as Britain.

¹³⁷ Olivia Solon and Ken Dilanian, "China's Influence Operations Offer Glimpse into Information Warfare's Future," *NBC News* (NBC News, October 21, 2020), <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/china-s-influence-operations-offer-glimpse-future-information-warfare-n1244065>.

¹³⁸ The Standard, "New UK Intel Chief Likens China Threat to Climate Change, While Russia Is Bad Weather," *The Standard* (The Standard Newspapers Publishing Ltd., October 15, 2020), <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/breaking-news/section/6/157484/New-UK-intel-chief-likens-China-threat-to-climate-change>.

Conclusion — Evaluating Future Strategies

“To make progress, we must stop treating our opponents as our enemy. We are not enemies. We are Americans.”¹³⁹

- *President-elect Joe Biden*

Overview of Analysis

Moving forward, I will assert that it is in the best interest of the United States government and its citizens to act swiftly and decisively in combating the growing threat of disinformation enabled by the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China. As we prepare to turn over the United States Presidency to a new administration, under President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, I will consider proposals for President-elect Biden’s Administration, proposals for national security advancement, and proposals for the private sector. Given these areas of focus, I will proceed with providing a high-level proposal on how each given functional area should focus its efforts in combating disinformation over the coming years, with consideration to Russia and China.

Proposals for President-elect Biden’s Administration

As the Trump administration comes to an end and Americans prepare for the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden, the next four years will be critical in terms of the evolution of U.S. relations with Russia and China. During the presidential campaign, President-elect Biden referred to China’s President as “a thug” during the tenth Democratic Debate in Charleston, South Carolina.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, President-elect Biden remains fairly vocal about his disapproval of

¹³⁹ Lauren Feiner, “Read Joe Biden’s First Speech as President-elect,” *CNBC* (CNBC, November 8, 2020), <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/07/read-joe-biden-acceptance-speech-full-text.html>.

¹⁴⁰ Bloomberg Politics, “Joe Biden Calls China’s Xi Jinping a ‘Thug,’” YouTube Video, *YouTube*, February 25, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcMT_QZN2xk.

recent actions taken by Russian President Vladimir Putin in a variety of spaces from election interference to failure to abide by the Open Skies Treaty.¹⁴¹ Though President-elect Biden has agreed with President Trump's decision to shift America's focus from the Middle East to China and Russia, he appears to hold back on his plan of action, Biden stated, "... there are a number of other important priorities..."¹⁴²

I suggest that President-elect Biden takes a hard stance on both China and Russia from the very start of his time in office, in order to display a clear unwillingness to cooperate with states that undermine the United States and its domestic politics. In regards to China, President Trump waged a fairly intense trade war with the country that has accumulated over US\$550 billion in tariffs applied to Chinese goods.¹⁴³ The tensions ignited by large tariff exchanges by both countries began to deescalate in early 2020, with the signing of the Phase One Trade Deal.¹⁴⁴ However, the consequential actions taken against Russia have been less direct in nature. President Trump has shown a willingness to impose sanctions on Russia's elite and to target strategic military operations of the state but the President continues to delay other congressional sanctions against Russia and avoid placing the blame on the state for aggressive acts in the international community.¹⁴⁵ With this in mind, President-elect Biden has the opportunity to enter office with the intent of mending torn economic relations with China and implementing clearer rhetoric that shows disapproval for Russia's recent actions. However, to best execute this agenda

¹⁴¹ RM Staff, "Joe Biden and Kamala Harris on Russia," *russiamatters.org* (Russia Matters, November 9, 2020), <https://russiamatters.org/analysis/joe-biden-and-kamala-harris-russia>.

¹⁴² New York Times, "National Security Strategy - Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, February 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/politics/2020-democrats-national-security-strategy-foreign-policy.html>.

¹⁴³ China Briefing, "The US-China Trade War: A Timeline - China Briefing News," *China Briefing News* (China Briefing News, August 25, 2020), <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/the-us-china-trade-war-a-timeline/>.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Natasha Turak, "Here's Where Trump Has Been Tough on Russia — and Where He's Backed down," *CNBC* (CNBC, July 16, 2018), <https://www.cNBC.com/2018/07/16/heres-where-trump-has-been-tough-on-russia--and-where-hes-backed-do.html>.

of diplomacy, President-elect Biden will need to focus on improving America's national security resources and processes to safeguard the U.S. from any potential future offensive actions taken by Russia or China during the course of this transition.

Proposals for National Security Advancements

With the public's growing concern over discerning factual news from foreign disinformation aimed at obscuring their perceptions, it is necessary for the U.S. Government and national security officials to begin increasing transparency and the rate in which they share relevant information on this particular topic with the general public. For instance, there was the unfavorable and lengthy delay of the 2020 Worldwide Threat Assessment to the House Intelligence Committee from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI).¹⁴⁶ While President Trump's administration has remained silent on commenting on the topic, staffers have remarked that the report will not be released for the foreseeable future.¹⁴⁷ In the face of a highly contested 2020 Presidential Election, the general public deserved to know the threats that were prevalent especially with respect to foreign disinformation targeting American voters. The divide within the flow of information between the federal government and the public must be immediately amended, as people have the right to hear an overview of threats that affect their daily interaction with news and information. Increased communication would only be beneficial in restoring the public's trust in our government and the democratic process.

Additionally, the United States government must continue to be proactive in establishing entities that can aid us to understand the threat of foreign disinformation and how we can improve existing national security agencies' abilities to combat these threats. As we have seen

¹⁴⁶ John Walcott, "The Trump Administration Is Stalling an Intel Report That Warns the U.S. Isn't Ready for a Global Pandemic," *Time* (Time, March 9, 2020), <https://time.com/5799765/intelligence-report-pandemic-dangers/>.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

recently, there have been recommendations for the development of a Social Media Data and Threat Analysis Center under the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).¹⁴⁸ The development of a center, similar to that which is listed above, could prove invaluable in increasing our nation’s cyber capabilities and would reinforce our commitment to combating the threat of disinformation. As suggested by Steven Bradley in a PCIO Policy Proposal, our government should look further into the formation of a federal commission that is responsible for establishing, “... guidelines to govern content moderation efforts by social platform operators...”¹⁴⁹ The federal government and national security agencies should also increase collaboration with the private sector in better managing the spread of disinformation domestically.

Proposals for the Private Sector

In the months leading up to the U.S. Presidential Election, President-elect Biden did not shy away from challenging the alleged lack of action taken when it comes to combating disinformation by social media giant, Facebook.¹⁵⁰ In a tweet, President-elect Biden called on his supporters to electronically sign an open letter that was intended for the co-founder and Chief Executive of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg.¹⁵¹ Within this letter, the Biden campaign coined the hashtag *#movefastfixit* and outlined four key asks: “[to] promote real news, not fake news; [to] quickly remove viral misinformation; [to] end the pre-election “lie” period; [and to] enforce

¹⁴⁸ Steven Bradley, “Securing the United States from Online Disinformation—A Whole-of-Society Approach,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 24, 2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/24/securing-united-states-from-online-disinformation-whole-of-society-approach-pub-82549>.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ BLOOMBERG, “Biden Goes after Facebook on Handling of Disinformation,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles Times, June 11, 2020), <https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2020-06-11/biden-goes-after-facebook-on-handling-of-disinformation>.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

voter suppression rules against everyone — even the President.”¹⁵² Additionally, the letter went on to assert the Biden Campaign’s belief that Facebook was blindly making itself vulnerable to disinformation campaigns launched by “foreign operatives” as seen in the 2016 election due to a lack of preemptive action with only five months remaining before the 2020 election.¹⁵³

However, one month prior to the election, Facebook stepped up and explicitly exercised its ability to slow misinformation and disinformation on a large scale, when it managed to suppress the further spread of a controversial New York Post article on Hunter Biden and a series of alleged emails.¹⁵⁴ Additionally, it is worth noting that Twitter had followed within Facebook’s actions by also removing the content and citing its “Hacked Materials Policy”.¹⁵⁵ Facebook went on to credit the timely response to its third-party-fact-checking program which has been under recent criticism as reports show that this entity had only reviewed 302 pieces of content in the month of January 2020.¹⁵⁶ While it proves to be a step in the right direction for combating this growing threat, many still believe that the response was not adequate. According to digital rights group Avaaz, the New York Post article still managed to receive 54,115,025 views and 2,164,601 interactions on Facebook.¹⁵⁷

Moving forward, we should adopt the Center for American Progress’s proposed concept of ‘circuit breakers’ across our social media platforms.¹⁵⁸ The purpose of this feature would be to

¹⁵² 2020 Biden Presidential Campaign, “MoveFastFixIt,” Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website (Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website, 2020), <https://joebiden.com/facebook/>.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Aaron Holmes Holmes and Paige Leskin, “Facebook and Twitter Are Choking the Spread of a Controversial New York Post Story about Hunter Biden after Questions Arise about Its Veracity and a Possible Disinformation Campaign,” *Business Insider* (Business Insider, October 14, 2020), <https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-hunter-biden-new-york-post-story-fact-checkers-2020-10>.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ David Gilbert, “Facebook Failed Miserably in Its Attempt to Stop the Hunter Biden Story,” *www.vice.com* (Vice Media Group, October 23, 2020), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4ady3g/facebook-failed-miserably-in-its-attempt-to-stop-the-hunter-biden-story>.

¹⁵⁸ Erin Simpson and Adam Conner, “Fighting Coronavirus Misinformation and Disinformation: Preventive Product Recommendations for Social Media Platforms,” *Center for American Progress* (Washington D.C.: Center for American Progress, August 18, 2020),

aid in the filtering of possible disinformation by temporarily preventing the platform’s algorithm to amplify the content in question.¹⁵⁹ As we have learned, the Facebook algorithm is more likely to suggest posts that appear to elicit a reaction, as it places an emphasis on showing posts that have larger amounts of likes, comments, and reactions.¹⁶⁰ With the assistance of this added feature, these platforms could potentially scale back the rate at which users are exposed to the content that is under review.¹⁶¹ Additionally, they could preemptive measures to warn users about the accuracy of a given post and guide them to more reliable sources.¹⁶²

Finally, I support the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence’s position that we have reached a point where we must begin to give a thought as to how to properly foster open discussions between our federal government and leading U.S. based social media companies.¹⁶³ With respect to the data privacy concerns of users across these platforms, I suggest the facilitation of publicly held discussions that aim to assess and design ways to share data with the necessary government agencies to assist in monitoring foreign disinformation campaigns that

https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/technology-policy/reports/2020/08/18/488714/fighting-coronavirus-misinformation-disinformation/?utm_campaign=The%20Interface&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Revue%20newsletter.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Facebook: Help Center, “What Kinds of Posts Will I See in News Feed on Facebook? | Facebook Help Center | Facebook,” [www.facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/help/166738576721085) (Facebook, 2020), <https://www.facebook.com/help/166738576721085>.

¹⁶¹ Erin Simpson and Adam Conner, “Fighting Coronavirus Misinformation and Disinformation: Preventive Product Recommendations for Social Media Platforms,” *Center for American Progress* (Washington D.C.: Center for American Progress, August 18, 2020),

https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/technology-policy/reports/2020/08/18/488714/fighting-coronavirus-misinformation-disinformation/?utm_campaign=The%20Interface&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Revue%20newsletter.

¹⁶² Erin Simpson and Adam Conner, “Fighting Coronavirus Misinformation and Disinformation: Preventive Product Recommendations for Social Media Platforms,” *Center for American Progress* (Washington D.C.: Center for American Progress, August 18, 2020),

https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/technology-policy/reports/2020/08/18/488714/fighting-coronavirus-misinformation-disinformation/?utm_campaign=The%20Interface&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Revue%20newsletter.

¹⁶³ Andrew Eversden, “Why It’s Difficult to Share Info with Big Tech to Combat Election Misinformation,” *Federal Times* (Federal Times, October 8, 2019),

<https://www.federaltimes.com/congress/capitol-hill/2019/10/09/why-its-difficult-to-share-info-with-big-tech-to-combat-election-misinformation/>.

threaten our national security and the credibility of our democracy.¹⁶⁴ With the threat of foreign disinformation increasing and the growth of our private sector similarly increasing, it is in the best interest of the United States government to tap into existing resources developed by the private sector to expedite the development of our federal defensive and offensive capabilities.

Closing Remarks

After reflecting on the three broad proposals for President-elect Biden and his administration, I would like to bring our attention to the underlying message within these areas of focus. Over the course of the past years, we have experienced a growing divide between the White House, the defense sector, and the private sector. The effects of this divide have been felt not only by our citizens but by the international community. This in return has made the U.S. vulnerable. However, regardless of the presidential administration, it is necessary to recognize that Russia and China are modernizing their offensive capabilities and agendas at an alarming rate. In the future, it will be imperative for Biden to establish fluidity among these three major areas of focus to defend against the growing threat of foreign disinformation that aims to delegitimize our democracy and disband our national unity.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

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