



CHINA'S DISCOURSE POWER OPERATIONS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

AN OVERVIEW OF CHINESE ACTIVITIES IN
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA, LATIN AMERICA,
AND THE MIDDLE EAST



The mission of the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) is to identify, expose, and explain disinformation where and when it occurs using open-source research; to promote objective truth as a foundation of government for and by people; to protect democratic institutions and norms from those who would seek to undermine them in the digital engagement space; to create a new model of expertise adapted for impact and real-world results; and to forge digital resilience at a time when humans are more interconnected than at any point in history, by building the world's leading hub of digital forensic analysts tracking events in governance, technology, and security.

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INTRODUCTION

As China's military and economic power has grown, so too has its investment in propaganda and influence operations. Following Xi Jinping's rise to power and China's adoption of a more confrontational foreign policy, the country saw a need to sway global public opinion in its favor. Beijing refers to this as "discourse power," a strategy to increase China's standing on the world stage by promoting pro-China narratives while criticizing geopolitical rivals. The end goal is to shape a world that is more amenable to China's expressions, and expansion, of power.¹

China sees the Global South as an important vector for enhancing discourse power and has deployed a number of tactics to disseminate Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-approved narratives there. Two pillars of its strategy include "using international friends for international propaganda" (通过国际友人开展国际传播) and "borrowing a boat out to sea" (借船出海). The first pillar relies on co-opting the voices of foreigners (and foreign leaders) to spread pro-China messaging.² The second pillar relies on using international platforms to spread Chinese propaganda in target environments.³ This includes expanding China's media footprint, conducting propaganda campaigns, and leveraging Beijing's influence to gain government support for its initiatives in international forums like the United Nations.

The logic behind this strategy is that, as China has begun to take a more active role in global affairs, Beijing has seen the need to address the potential for collective mobilization in response to its behavior. China understands that countries like the United States and the United Kingdom are assessing its expansionism and have already moved to counter its influence.⁴ By gaining control of the narrative to depict its expanding role in the world as legitimate, rules-based, and win-win, China is seeking to shift the burden of proof onto Western countries and silence potential critics. Xi outlined this strategy

in a May 2021 speech to the Central Committee, emphasizing that China must "expand [its] international communication through international friends," adding that these "foreign friends" will be the country's "top soldiers of propaganda against the enemy" as China rises.⁵

To this end, one focus of China's global discourse power push has been to foster buy-in from leaders in the Global South for Chinese-defined norms.⁶ This includes its principles of "non-interference" in other countries' internal affairs and on a concept of "human rights" that actively subordinates personal and civic freedoms in favor of state-centered economic development. It is meant to stand in opposition to a Western human rights framework that China criticizes as having been used for interventionist ends, for example, in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁷

Beijing also sees control over the media environment as critical for enhancing its discourse power so that it can spread a positive "China story" (讲好中国故事). In doing so, it is better able to promote its image as a responsible power and gain support for China's model of international relations—one that privileges state sovereignty over universal human rights, government control over public discourse, and authoritarianism over democracy. As Chinese scholars Mi Guanghong and Mi Yang put it, "strengthening the dissemination, influence and creativity of external propaganda is [in the fundamental interests of] the country, with profound practical significance."⁸

China's discourse power strategy also involves creating multilateral regional organizations to advance its interests. This includes the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Africa, the Forum of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (China-CELAC Forum) in Latin America, and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in the Middle East. China leverages its position in these forums to

1 *Chinese Discourse Power: China's Use of Information Manipulation in Regional and Global Competition*, Digital Forensic Research Lab and Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Atlantic Council, December 2020, 1–25, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/China-Discourse-Power-FINAL.pdf>.

2 Zhao Xinli, "积极通过国际友人开展国际传播" ("Actively carry out international communication through international friends"), *Public Diplomacy Quarterly* 3 (2021), https://caod.oriprobe.com/articles/62415542/ji_ji_tong_guo_guo_ji_you_ren_kai_zhan_guo_ji_chua.htm.

3 Wang Shucheng, "融媒时代的对外传播要强化战略定力" ("External communication in the era of convergent media should strengthen strategic determination"), *People's Daily*, August 22, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2016-08/22/c_135624493.htm.

4 "澳英美联盟树立了一个坏榜样" ("Australia-UK-US alliance sets a bad example"), *Xinhua*, January 6, 2022, http://www.news.cn/globe/2022-01/06/c_1310396517.htm.

5 "习近平在中共中央政治局第三十次集体学习时强调 加强和改进国际传播工作 展示真实立体全面的中国" ("During the 30th collective study of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping emphasized strengthening and improving international communication work and showing a true, three-dimensional and comprehensive China"), *Xinhua*, June 1, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-06/01/c_1127517461.htm.

6 "‘中国的民主’白皮书(全文)" ["China: Democracy That Works' White Paper (Full Text)"], State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, December 12, 2021, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/32832/Document/1717206/1717206.htm>.

7 Kenton Thibaut and Roman Osadchuk, "China, Russia frame US as human rights 'hypocrites' in wake of Afghanistan withdrawal," *Digital Forensic Research Lab*, September 7, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfriab/china-russia-frame-us-as-human-rights-hypocrites-in-wake-of-afghanistan-withdrawal-96a937146edb>.

8 Mi Guanghong and Mi Yang, "应对外宣挑战 树立国际形象" ("Responding to the Challenge of External Propaganda and Establishing an International Image"), *Public Diplomacy Quarterly* 3, (2021).

gain support for its international initiatives, to deepen its economic and political engagement, and to promote state narratives. For example, one concept central to China's discourse power strategy is its vision to build a "community with a shared future"—language Chinese officials and diplomats often use in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-connected engagements with foreign counterparts to signify China's pursuit of a multilateral approach to international relations as an alternative to the "unilateral" approach taken by the United States. This strategy is what Chinese scholars call the "subcutaneous injection (皮下注射)" theory of communications—winning international "friends" who understand their own local contexts and are able to "tell China's story" to allow for a more "immediate and quick" dissemination of Chinese discourse priorities in the region.⁹

The regions addressed in this report—Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East—are located in the Global South, which is at the forefront of China's discourse power push. This is for a number of reasons: China sees waning US involvement in these regions as an opportunity for it to win "international friends" as great-power competition increases; emerging economies offer fruitful opportunities to expand the scope and depth of the BRI, a massive predominantly infrastructure initiative; and Beijing wants to convince others

of its "peaceful rise" in order to assuage growing concerns over its increasingly visible global presence.

Yet these areas of the world have received less attention in public policy and research spaces than Chinese propaganda efforts in Western countries. In the meantime, the impacts of Chinese discourse power operations in these regions are affecting democratic norms and behaviors by constraining the space for organic civil society discourse and by further entrenching existing autocratic regimes. This report aims to shed light on China's activities in these regions and to offer an initial assessment of the impacts of its efforts.

The first section of this report will provide an overview of Chinese discourse power operations, including its origins and aims. The second section is comprised of three regional subsections that focus on Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, respectively. Each subsection includes a broad overview of how the region fits into China's global discourse power strategy and features an associated country case study. The case studies highlight recent Chinese influence campaigns and their effects on domestic political, social, and media environments.

The third and final section of this report synthesizes trends and themes, offering a preliminary assessment of their potential implications and impact.

9 Zhao, "积极."

METHODOLOGY

This project used three complementary research strategies.

First, the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) identified China's discourse power priorities in each of the target geographies, examining primary source materials in Chinese to outline the aims and activities of China's discourse power operations both regionally and globally.

This Chinese-language material included official Chinese policy and strategy documents; government-sponsored research; Chinese scholarly writings on discourse power and international relations; Chinese state media articles; and statements from Chinese officials. In addition, the DFRLab analyzed Chinese state media in local languages, for example, those targeting Latin American audiences in Spanish via Xinhua Español or Persian audiences through China's China Radio International (CRI) Persian channel.

Second, after identifying China's narrative priorities, the DFRLab outlined the means through which Chinese state actors pushed these narratives through the framework of the "two pillars" described above: "using international friends for international propaganda" (通过国际友人开展国际传播) and "borrowing a boat out to sea" (借船出海). Examples include China's efforts to establish local diplomatic ties in Latin America through the CCP's International Liaison Department (ILD) and its growing network of content exchange agreements with media organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa. The report assesses the potential scope and impacts of China's efforts by examining its promotion of China-developed norms, the penetration of its state media footprint, and attempts to increase its regional and international influence through China-sponsored cooperation forums.

Third, the DFRLab produced deep-dive country case studies to detail how Chinese actors pushed China's narratives in domestic media contexts and to illustrate the on-the-ground impacts of these regional efforts. This included monitoring and aggregate analysis of identifiable CCP broadcast and social media accounts, as well as those of their domestic state counterparts, including state media, government institutions, and public officials.

For instance, by identifying the narratives China is pushing in its state media, it is possible to analyze the interactions between Chinese state-affiliated social media accounts and accounts tied to domestic actors in the countries analyzed to determine how they amplify certain narratives or engage in inauthentic manipulation.

Extended versions of the three case studies can be found on the DFRLab's website.¹⁰

China's Discourse Power Strategy in Context

The roots of China's discourse power push can be traced back to 2008, when a confluence of domestic and global developments spurred the Chinese leadership to think more deeply about China's growing role in the world, and the need to shape global perceptions of its rise.

First, China viewed the global financial crisis of 2008 as signalling the decline of the West, just as its own economic power was ascendant. There was a growing view among CCP leadership that the opportunity was ripe for China to step out from the shadow of the United States, establish primacy in Asia, and expand its reach further afield.¹¹

Second, growing nationalist sentiment among the Chinese populace created domestic pressure for China to act with more confidence on the world stage. This was in large part triggered by what many Chinese saw as unfair Western media coverage of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, which focused heavily on ongoing protests in Tibet. The coverage was viewed by many Chinese as an insult to China's national pride. Chinese Internet users began a widespread campaign to point out how Western-based media outlets were skewing coverage to "keep China down,"¹² a campaign the Chinese Embassy in the United States supported and amplified. The reaction went so far that members of the diaspora even created anti-CNN and anti-BBC websites, with Chinese Internet users posting thousands of comments to their message boards criticizing Western media.¹³

10 For the full text of the case studies, see the following links: (case study 1): Kenton Thibaut, "China's COVID-19 messaging makes its way to South Africa," Digital Forensic Research Lab, December 22, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/chinas-covid-19-messaging-makes-its-way-to-south-africa-f89ff7504be>; (case study 2): Daniel Suárez Pérez and Kenton Thibaut, "Pro-China messaging amplified in Venezuela's 'hashtag of the day,'" Digital Forensic Research Lab, January 26, 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-china-messaging-amplified-in-venezuelas-hashtag-of-the-day-2f6bc704264>; and (case study 3): Simin Kargar, "A Moment of Truth for China's Vaccine Diplomacy in Iran," Digital Forensic Research Lab, February 14, 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/a-moment-of-truth-for-chinas-vaccine-diplomacy-in-iran-3ada4e6ffde>.

11 Dai Xu, *C-shaped encirclement—China's breakthrough under internal and external troubles* (Beijing: Wenhan, 2009).

12 "[东方时空]正告CNN：网民为什么愤怒？" ("Warning to CNN: Why are netizens angry?"), Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, April 1, 2008, http://www.china-embassy.org/chn/zclm2013/zt/szwt/200804/t20080401_5074704.htm.

13 Phil Harding, "China needs to stop playing games," *Guardian*, May 25, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2008/may/26/chinathemedia.china>.

Internal demand for China to step up and assert its own voice was growing. As China scholar Lichao He wrote, after 2008, “the Chinese people cast off the identity of being victims of foreign oppression, taking on the new identity of a great power...this new national identity seeks the prestige of a major power that is rooted in Chinese civilization and culture.”¹⁴ China’s mingled sense of pride and grievance at this time is captured in a popular nationalist book titled *China Is Not Happy* (中国不高兴). Released in early 2009, the book urged China to assert itself more forcefully in international politics and claim its “rightful position” as a great power.¹⁵ The book sold 500,000 copies in its first few months and rose to the top of the bestselling books list in China.

This rising nationalist sentiment led Chinese elites to champion policy changes in China’s military, foreign policy, and diplomatic strategies. In 2009, senior Chinese military officers began openly pressuring the government to push back against the West, particularly the United States, on many foreign policy issues. A 2010 book titled *The China Dream* (中国梦), which preceded Xi’s later campaign of the same name, called for China to abandon its modest foreign policy posture and build up its military capabilities to mitigate the ability of the United States to challenge its power.¹⁶

At the same time, however, Chinese leaders understood the need to develop a discursive ability commensurate with China’s growing power to shape a positive perception of its rise.¹⁷ In other words, China’s new international status required the power to express its values and justify its causes on its own terms, rather than on those of the West. For instance, under this premise, China should have been able to define how issues like the 2008 Tibet protests were depicted rather than having Western media establish the framing of the issue.

To this end, Chinese thinkers in the 2010s began to grapple with how to develop what became known as China’s “discourse power.” Zhang Zhizhou, one of China’s leading academics on this topic, established some baseline principles in July 2012.¹⁸ Zhang wrote that

China must assert its “own narrative” to “justify China’s rise, international identity, domestic and foreign policies, development path, and values.” At the same time, China must “proactively guide the mainstream discourse system from that of Western centrism to one that reflects the common interests and values that China has put forward.”¹⁹ Over time, Chinese scholars added the aims of “expanding China’s presence in cooperative multilateral organizations,” and the need for greater “media diplomacy” to assure China’s discourse power.²⁰

These earlier discussions of discourse power provided both a goal and preliminary plan for implementation. However, the notion of discourse power as a tool of statecraft gained real prominence after Xi was named CCP general secretary in November 2012. During the CCP’s 18th National Congress that same month, Xi put forward a foreign policy principle of “major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” (中国特色社会主义大国外交), elevating discourse power to a national priority. Xi described it as an essential part of China’s ability to achieve the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (中华民族伟大复兴).²¹

The “rejuvenation” narrative also marked China’s transition away from the inwardly focused principle of “peaceful development” (和平发展) to that of China’s “peaceful rise” (和平崛起). This shift signaled China’s recognition of its own great-power status, which necessitated greater external engagement. Xi’s elevation of discourse power signaled that Beijing understood its utility in smoothing the way for China’s expansion of its power, in that it serves to mitigate attempts by Western countries to mobilize others against its expanding political, economic, and military reach.²²

To accomplish this, Beijing exerts greater influence through bilateral and multilateral diplomatic initiatives and by influencing developing countries’ digital information environments. It does this to promote positive narratives about China and suppress criticism of its actions, both central components of its discourse power strategy. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a marked increase in

14 Lichao He, “Ready to Become a Great Power? The Recent Nationalist Movement and China’s Evolving National Identity,” *Journal of International and Area Studies* 16 (2) (2009): 53–54.

15 中国不高兴 (*China Is Not Happy*) (Nanjing: Jiangsu People’s 2009): 61–62.

16 Liu Mingfu, *中国梦* (*The China Dream*) (Beijing: China Friendly, 2010). See also: Liu Mingfu, “The World Is Too Important to Be Left to America,” *Atlantic*, June 4, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/china-dream-liu-mingfu-power/394748/>.

17 “习近平: 建设社会主义文化强国 着力提高国家文化软实力” (“Xi Jinping: Build a socialist cultural power and focus on improving the country’s cultural soft power”), *People’s Daily*, January 1, 2014, archived at <https://archive.fo/sYMZV>; and Liu Yandong, “推进文化改革发展 增强我国国际话语权” (“Advancing Cultural Reform and Development, Enhancing my country’s International Discourse Power”), *People’s Daily*, November 1, 2011, archived at <https://archive.fo/REpfl>.

18 Zhang Zhizhou, “张志洲: 和平崛起与中国的国际话语权战略” (“Zhang Zhizhou: Peaceful Rise and China’s Strategy for International Discourse Power”), *Aisixiang*, August 7, 2012, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/56190.html>.

19 Ibid.

20 See: Ye Shulan, “中国外交话语权的历史演进、基本经验及生成逻辑” (“The Historical Evolution, Basic Experience and Generating Logic of China’s Diplomatic Discourse Power”), *International Review* 5 (2021): 53–78; Zhao Rongying, Zhang Xiaoxi, Liu Zhuozuo, and Zhu Weijie, “话语与话语权评价解析” (“Discourse power and discourse power evaluation analysis”), *Information Studies: Theory and Application*, 44 (11) (2021): 15–22; and Zhang Duo, “中国新型政党制度话语权的结构分析” (“A Structural Analysis of the Discourse Power of China’s New Political Party System”), *Journal of Socialist Theory Guide* 1 (2021): 44–50.

21 CCCPC Party Literature Research Office, ed., 习近平关于实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦论述摘编 (*Excerpts from Xi Jinping’s Thesis on Realizing the Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation*) (2013), archived at <http://web.archive.org/web/20220203182234/http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/68294/388648/index.html>.

22 Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2018), 22.

Chinese influence operations as Beijing sought to publicize its donation efforts and mitigate criticism over its lack of transparency regarding the outbreak in the early days of the pandemic.²³ The Global South was a significant target of China's "vaccine diplomacy," as Beijing saw an opportunity to win influence through donations of vaccine supplies and protective gear.

China's new foreign policy approach also includes the BRI (一帶一路), Xi's signature foreign policy initiative launched in 2013. Through the BRI, Chinese institutions provide funding for infrastructure projects such as ports, railways, 5G networks, and fiber-optic cables in participating countries, a majority of which are located in the Global South. However, China sees the expansion of the BRI in the Global South not just as an economic opportunity but also as a valuable means to expand its discourse power. It considers the Global South as critical for shoring up influence as great-power competition increases and as a means of gaining international friends and media platforms needed to mitigate Western efforts to undermine its growing influence. Increasingly, the BRI has expanded to include cultural and media cooperation initiatives, which China has leveraged in regions across

the globe. As of March 2021, thirty-nine countries in Sub-Saharan Africa had joined the initiative, along with thirty-four in Europe and Central Asia, twenty-five in East Asia and the Pacific, eighteen in Latin America and the Caribbean, seventeen in the Middle East and North Africa, and six in South Asia.²⁴

While part of China's interest in the Global South is a natural result of its growing economic and political clout—and is not problematic in and of itself—the tactics employed to enhance its discourse power are cause for concern.

China's model of international relations has distinct advantages for authoritarian states. Discourse power narratives emphasize an authoritarian vision of state sovereignty and human rights under the guise of non-interference, which has serious implications for democratic resilience in the Global South. Many countries targeted by Chinese influence operations lack robust democratic and civil society institutions that could provide effective counternarratives. As shown in the regional subsections below, the end result is often the undermining of democratic institutions and entrenchment of existing autocratic regimes.

23 See: Bonny Lin, Matthew P. Funairole, Brian Hart, and Hannah Price, "China Is Exploiting the Pandemic to Advance Its Interests, with Mixed Results," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 30, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-exploiting-pandemic-advance-its-interests-mixed-results>.

24 David Sacks, "Countries in China's Belt and Road Initiative: Who's In And Who's Out," *Asia Unbound* (Council on Foreign Relations), March 24, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/countries-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-whos-and-whos-out>.

DISCOURSE POWER IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA, LATIN AMERICA, AND THE MIDDLE EAST

As highlighted above, China uses its discourse power strategy as a broad framework in its approach to the world at large. However, its application in different regions around the world retains some more tailored approaches. In Sub-Saharan Africa, China's focus on growing its broadcast media footprint is particularly notable; in Latin America, it is China's recent successes in gaining support for its positions on issues like Taiwan and Xinjiang; and in the Middle East, it is China's efforts to undermine Western notions of democracy in the wake of the West's declining credibility in the region.

China in Sub-Saharan Africa

As with other regions of the Global South, China's discourse power aims in Sub-Saharan Africa include fostering buy-in among leaders (i.e., cultivating "international friends") for Chinese-defined norms and initiatives, largely through public diplomacy, regional engagement, and media investment. Compared to other areas of the Global South, however, China's media operations in Sub-Saharan Africa have expanded rapidly and serve as primary vectors for increasing its influence in the region. This capture of the African media space complements another phenomenon related to Chinese influence: the massive increase in Chinese foreign investment in the continent over the past decade, largely through initiatives under the BRI.

First, China gains discourse power in the region through its multilateral engagements, which mainly occur through the FOCAC (中非合作论坛). China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the FOCAC

in 2000, and it now includes fifty African states. On November 29, 2021, Xi gave a speech at the eighth convening of the FOCAC in which he promoted norms and concepts central to China's discourse power strategy. He touched on the theme of "major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics" when he pledged to build a "community with a shared future for mankind" (人类命运共同体) in Africa.²⁵ He also declared that Chinese cooperation with African countries would not hinge on Western notions of "so-called human rights" that violate the sovereign right of countries to determine their own "internal affairs."²⁶

As Xi stated, "[both China and Africa] advocate for a development path that suits our own national conditions...and both oppose interference in internal affairs, racial discrimination and unilateral sanctions." At a high-level dialogue interpreting the outcomes of the 2021 FOCAC meeting, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, Senegalese President Macky Sall, and other African leaders praised China's role in the forum, including its "promotion of the realization of a fair and just international order" and for "enhancing Africa's own discourse power."²⁷

Another cornerstone of China's discourse power strategy in Sub-Saharan Africa is to develop a vast media presence. In 2008, as part of China's "going out" strategy to tell the story of its growing presence on the world stage, then premier Wen Jiabao urged Chinese media companies to go international and "present a true picture of China to the world."²⁸ To support the strategy, the Ministry of Finance budgeted 45 billion yuan (\$7.1 billion in 2022 dollars) in 2009 to expand China's main news organizations globally.²⁹ As one state media opinion piece put it, "To make the rest of the world aware of China's role in Africa, the Chinese mass media have to break the monopoly of their Western competitors in Africa and spread the facts, as well as the

25 FOCAC, "Full Text: Keynote speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping at opening ceremony of 8th FOCAC ministerial conference," Xinhua, December 2, 2021, archived at <https://archive.fo/ODK6H>.

26 China's State Council Information Office, "China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals," China Daily, November 27, 2021, archived at <https://archive.fo/agGJO>.

27 African Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, "驻南非大使出席中非合作论坛第八届部长级会议成果解读高端对话会并作主旨发言" ("Ambassador to South Africa attended the high-level dialogue on the interpretation of the outcomes of the 8th Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and delivered a keynote speech"), FOCAC, December 19, 2021, http://www.focac.org/zfgx/zjw/202112/t20211209_10465288.htm.

28 Yu-Shan Wu, "The Rise of China's State-Led Media Dynasty in Africa," SAIIA, Occasional Paper No. 117, June (2012), https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/146130/saia_sop_%20117_wu_20120618.pdf.

29 "Beijing in 45b yuan global media drive," South China Morning Post, January 13, 2009, archived at <https://archive.fo/laAPw>.

views, of the Chinese government and think tanks across the world.”³⁰

Over the last twenty years, China has dramatically increased its media presence in Sub-Saharan Africa. Xinhua, China's official state press agency, moved its Africa bureau to Nairobi in 2004,³¹ while China's central state broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV), launched its broadcasting center there in 2012.³² (CCTV is now known as China Global Television Network, or CGTN.) State-owned newspaper *China Daily* launched its Africa operations that same year.³³ According to a recent estimate by China's State Council Information Office (SCIO), Chinese media organizations provide 13 million African users with programming in eleven languages, across more than six hundred channels.³⁴

China has also increased its media footprint through commercial endeavors. Chinese television company StarTimes started operating in the African market in 2008 with a stated goal to “ensure that every African family can access, afford, watch and share the beauty of digital TV.”³⁵ As of 2020, it had more than 13 million subscribers across countries in Africa and was leading the continent's transition from analog to digital television by offering relatively lower-cost cable packages, some as low as \$4 per month.³⁶ As part of its digital TV offerings, StarTimes features a number of channels devoted to promoting the image of China as a “prosperous, benevolent, responsible world power.”³⁷ For example, in October 2021, StarTimes launched a new program called “China-Africa Express” to bolster official Chinese narratives in the run-up to the FOCAC conference. The show focuses on China-Africa exchange as well as China-sponsored events, like the

FOCAC, according to a company press release published on WeChat.³⁸

China's media expansion in Africa is in large part enabled by its substantial economic investments. For example, most of China's media cooperation occurs under the auspices of the BRI. Thirty African media companies have joined China's Belt and Road News Cooperation Alliance, and forty-two African countries currently participate in China's Belt and Road Media Cooperation Forum.³⁹ Key aims of these mechanisms include promoting joint projects between Chinese and African media organizations, along with “information aggregation, cooperation on marketing, mutual visits of personnel, content exchange, technology training, and mutual learning.”⁴⁰

Under similar arrangements, Xinhua has signed syndication agreements and content exchanges with a growing number of African partner organizations, including Ghana News Agency and South Africa's African News Agency. Similarly, Kenyan outlets frequently publish feature stories from Xinhua, increasing the use of its content over time.⁴¹ And in November 2021, China Media Group (CMG), the state media company that oversees CRI and CGTN, set up a “cooperation platform” with thirty-six African media partners, a large component of which includes content sharing. Examples of projects include an agreement between CMG's Hausa Service and Nigerian media companies to establish a common platform for Hausa-language media; and a media event with CMG's French service for a “Sino-African Kungfu Show.”⁴² However, as CMG President Shen Haixiong stated in a New Year's address on January 1, 2022, “presenting China's stories well to global audiences remains the CMG's mission.”⁴³

30 Deng Yanting, “Sino-African ties dissected,” *China Daily*, February 1, 2012, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2012-02/01/content_14514767.htm.

31 Xin Xin, “Xinhua News Agency in Africa,” *Journal of African Media Studies* 1 (3) (2009): 363–377.

32 Zhang Jianzhong, “中国对非洲的媒体外交与战略传播分析——以‘央视非洲分台’为例” (“Analysis of China's Media Diplomacy and Strategic Communication to Africa—Taking ‘CCTV Africa Branch’ as an example”), *China Television* (2013): 87.

33 David Smith, “China Daily to publish African edition as Beijing strengthens voice abroad,” *Guardian*, May 14, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/14/china-daily-newspaper-launches-african-edition>; and “China Daily launches Africa Weekly edition,” *China Daily*, December 14, 2012, archived at <https://archive.fo/sQtDe>.

34 State Council Information Office, “新时代的中非合作” (“China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals”), State Council of the People's Republic of China, November 26, 2021, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-11/26/content_5653540.htm.

35 “About Us,” StarTimes, archived at <https://archive.fo/oFAB2>.

36 “About Us,” StarTimes; and “StarTimes to broadcast program to boost Sino-Africa relations,” *Xinhua*, January 29, 2021, archived at <https://archive.fo/3Omoa>.

37 Eric Olander, “China's StarTimes is Now One of Africa's Most Important Media Companies,” *China Africa Project*, August 27, 2017, <https://chinaafricaproject.com/podcasts/podcast-china-africa-startimes-media-tv-dani-madrid-morales/>.

38 StarTimes, “上新 | 四达时代集团首档中非交流资讯节目‘中非直通车’正式起航” (“StarTimes Group's first China-Africa exchange information program ‘China-Africa Express’ officially set sail”), WeChat, October 11, 2021, archived at <https://archive.ph/NOZ2j>.

39 State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, “新时代的中非合作” (“China-Africa Cooperation in the New Era”), State Council of the People's Republic of China, November 26, 2021, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-11/26/content_5653540.htm.

40 “一带一路”新闻合作联盟章程” (“The Articles of Association of the Belt and Road News Cooperation Alliance”), State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, April 25, 2019, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/31773/35507/htws35512/Document/1652840/1652840.htm>.

41 Herman Wasserman and Dani Madrid-Morales, “How Influential Are Chinese Media in Africa? An Audience Analysis in Kenya and South Africa,” *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 20, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/7809>; Michael Yao Wodui Serwornoo, “The coverage of Africa in Ghanaian newspapers: The dominant Western voice in the continent's coverage,” *Journalism* 22 (12) (2019): 3013–3030, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919887311>; and Mwaona Nyirongo, “From watchdog to lapdog: political influence of China on news reporting in Malawi,” *Afrika Focus* 33 (2) (2020): 27–48, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/From-watchdog-to-lapdog%3A-political-influence-of-on-Nyirongo/ca9be8316d75f43741f28abf2a2e80effbdf035d>.

42 “CMG Holds Cooperation Forum with African Media Partners,” CGTN Africa, November 26, 2021, <https://africa.cgtv.com/2021/11/26/cmg-holds-cooperation-forum-with-african-media-partners/>.

43 “CCTV+: China Media Group president delivers New Year message to global audience,” *Yahoo News*, January 1, 2022, <https://www.yahoo.com/now/cctv-china-media-group-president-170000028.html>.

More recent scholarly assessments of the exposure of African audiences to Chinese state propaganda have provided insight into the potential impact of China's efforts. A 2019 study of twenty-eight thousand news articles from more than one hundred news outlets in twenty-eight African countries—ten of which are in Sub-Saharan Africa—found that coverage of topics like the BRI skewed “overwhelmingly positive” in the African region versus that in European and South Asian regions. As China-related content is often provided at no or low cost to local African news agencies through content-sharing agreements, the study found Chinese state media content made up the bulk of the reporting on China in local media, skewing coverage of China-centric issues more positively.⁴⁴

The implications of China's growing efforts in the media sphere are potentially troubling, as they might contribute to the already precarious state of press freedom in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to Reporters Without Borders, for 2021, twenty-three of the forty-eight countries in the region (two more than in 2020) were marked as “bad” or “very bad” on the World Press Freedom map.⁴⁵ In Zambia, for example, China's growing footprint in the media space has led to declines in press freedom. The International Republican Institute (IRI) reports troubling effects of China's growing influence in Zambia's civic discourse, reporting that its government has censored or discouraged criticism of China across the media.⁴⁶ As one example, in 2018, when Kenyan law professor Patrick Lumumba was invited to Zambia's Eden University to give a lecture on Chinese influence in Africa, he was refused entry to the country at the airport, before being deported back to Kenya for “security considerations.”⁴⁷

Recent evidence suggests that China's successes are not just rhetorical. A January 2022 quantitative study of Chinese influence in Africa from 2001 to 2018 found a positive and significant relationship between increases in Chinese foreign direct investment in fifty-four African countries and adherence to Chinese voting preferences in the United Nations General Assembly. The authors found that over the eighteen-year period surveyed, political alignment between China and African countries

increased by around 80 percent. As the authors put it, “In essence, China's investment in Africa ensures that its investment results in greater global consensus around Chinese interests.”⁴⁸

Case study: China's COVID-19 messaging makes its way to South Africa⁴⁹

As with Sub-Saharan Africa more broadly, China's activity in the South African media space has garnered increasing attention. Specifically, policy makers and civil society actors have pointed out China's increased investment in South African media companies and questioned whether this has influenced press freedom in the country.⁵⁰ One well-known example is Independent Online (IOL), a news and information website in South Africa, 20 percent of which is controlled by Chinese state entities, including the China-Africa Development Fund (CADFund) and China International Television Corporation (CITVC).⁵¹

From June through September 2021, China amplified a conspiracy theory on the origin of COVID-19 in the South African media space through its content exchange and syndication agreements with South African partner news organizations. This case study focuses on IOL.

IOL oversees several news organizations in South Africa with sizeable Twitter followings, including—as of December 2021—@TheCapeArgus (with 46,900 followers), @CapeTimesSA (38,500 followers), @pretorianews (41,600 followers), @TheMercurySA (222,900 followers), @TheStar_news (with 220,800 followers), and @IOL itself (560,500 followers). News items that IOL receives from Xinhua are distributed to these media platforms, which in turn publish the content on their websites or social media platforms. A December 2021 search of the most recent three thousand five hundred tweets for each of the above Twitter handles found that news with the term “China” often consists of retweets from Chinese diplomatic accounts and Xinhua-provided

44 Dani Madrid-Morales, “China's media presence in Africa is growing fast. Is its influence growing at the same pace?” *Asia Dialogue*, August 29, 2019, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2019/08/29/chinas-media-presence-in-africa-is-growing-fast-is-its-influence-growing-at-the-same-pace/>.

45 “RSF 2021 Index: Covid makes African journalism more vulnerable than ever,” RSF (Reporters Without Borders), 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-2021-index-covid-makes-african-journalism-more-vulnerable-ever-0>.

46 David Shullman, ed., *Chinese Malign Influence and the Corrosion of Democracy*, International Republican Institute, 2019, 35–38, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/chinese_malign_influence_report.pdf.

47 “Zambia refuses entry to Kenyan law professor for ‘security’ reasons,” News24, September 30, 2018, <https://www.news24.com/News24/zambia-refuses-entry-to-kenyan-law-professor-for-security-reasons-20180929>.

48 Carla D. Jones, Hermann A. Ndofo, and Mengge Li, “Chinese Economic Engagement in Africa: Implications for U.S. Policy,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, January 24, 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/01/chinese-economic-engagement-in-africa/>.

49 The full report that forms the basis of this case study can be found here: Thibaut, “China's COVID-19 messaging,” <https://medium.com/dfrlab/chinas-covid-19-messaging-makes-its-way-to-south-africa-f89ff7504be>.

50 Azad Essa, “China Is Buying African Media's Silence,” Foreign Policy, September 14, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/14/china-is-buying-african-medias-silence/>.

51 Herman Wasserman, “China in South Africa: media responses to a developing relationship,” *Chinese Journal of Communication* (2012) (5) (3): 336–354, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17544750.2012.701428>.

content; preliminary sentiment analysis found that the vast majority of tweets were overwhelmingly positive toward China.

In early 2020, Chinese state actors began to circulate a baseless narrative claiming that COVID-19 originated at Fort Detrick, a US military base in Maryland. China redoubled its efforts to promote the Fort Detrick conspiracy theory following the March 2021 release of the World Health Organization's (WHO's) long-awaited report on possible origins of COVID-19.

Media activity from July through September 2021, the peak of China's retaliation over the WHO report, indicated that China potentially leveraged its syndication agreements with IOL to amplify and legitimize the Fort Detrick conspiracy theory.

For example, an IOL opinion piece written by IOL Foreign Editor Shannon Ebrahim closely resembled Chinese state talking points and speculation about Fort Detrick. In the September 3, 2021, piece, Ebrahim wrote about the need for the WHO to investigate Fort Detrick, linking a 2019 public safety incident at the lab to the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States.⁵³ This echoed the main talking points from an earlier media release issued by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on August 26, 2021. The release also linked the 2019 incident at Fort Detrick to the outbreak of COVID-19. "After the [Fort Detrick base] was shut down because of serious safety incidents in 2019, [a] disease with symptoms similar to that of COVID-19 broke out in the US," Wang Wenbin, China's foreign ministry spokesman, is quoted as saying in the media release.⁵⁴



首页 > 使馆活动/新闻发布

南非知名主编：有必要调查美国实验室以进行新冠病毒溯源

2021-09-03 01:20

Probe into US labs necessary in pursuit of Covid origins

It blames China, but refuses to allow investigations into its own bio-warfare activities

Screencap of IOL Foreign Editor Shannon Ebrahim's article, as posted to the website of the Chinese Embassy in South Africa.⁵⁵

52 DFRLab via TweetBeaver.

53 Shannon Ebrahim, "Investigation of US labs necessary in pursuit of Covid origins," IOL, September 3, 2021, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/opinion/investigation-of-us-labs-necessary-in-pursuit-of-covid-origins-93e7d97b-f12e-4e61-9777-10a9b278c0cb>.

54 "Wang Wenbin: U.S. should invite WHO to probe Fort Detrick and University of North Carolina," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Commonwealth of Australia, August 26, 2021, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceau/eng/sghdxfwb_1/t1901972.htm.

55 Ibid.

CHINA'S DISCOURSE POWER OPERATIONS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Tweet author	Date posted	Tweet text	Favorited	Retweeted
TheCapeArgus	Tue Nov 16 10:00:51 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: You're all invited to join us at "Chinese Embassy webinar"	0	17
TheCapeArgus	Thu Oct 14 09:42:13 +0000 2021	RT @WuPeng_MFACHina: After 5 months of waiting, the prize-winning works	0	26
TheCapeArgus	Tue Sep 28 09:40:10 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: Welcome to our #ChinaNationalDay Virtual Reception 2021	0	19
TheCapeArgus	Thu Sep 02 06:22:15 +0000 2021	Deputy Minister for State Security in the Presidency Zizi Kodwa also distance	0	0
CapeTimesSA	Tue Nov 16 09:59:54 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: You're all invited to join us at "Chinese Embassy webinar"	0	17
CapeTimesSA	Thu Nov 04 22:51:23 +0000 2021	50th anniversary of the restoration of China's lawful seat in the UN https://t.co	0	0
CapeTimesSA	Thu Oct 14 09:41:26 +0000 2021	RT @WuPeng_MFACHina: After 5 months of waiting, the prize-winning works	0	26
CapeTimesSA	Tue Sep 28 09:34:31 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: Welcome to our #ChinaNationalDay Virtual Reception 2021	0	19
CapeTimesSA	Thu Sep 02 06:30:56 +0000 2021	Deputy Minister for State Security in the Presidency Zizi Kodwa also distance	0	0
CapeTimesSA	Tue Aug 03 14:19:22 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: Both Mr @AkaniSimbine and Mr #SuBingtian are the hero	0	21
CapeTimesSA	Mon Jun 21 15:06:01 +0000 2021	Dr Surv-© says Independent Media and ANA will tell the story of China, #	0	1
CapeTimesSA	Tue Jun 15 09:21:07 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: Welcome to join us at the High-Level Dialogue on Celebra	0	10
CapeTimesSA	Thu May 20 08:22:40 +0000 2021	#Bitcoin recovered marginally from the previous session's brutal slide to four	0	0
CapeTimesSA	Mon Mar 29 09:45:00 +0000 2021	The allegation of "forced labor" is nothing but malicious lies in an attempt to s	0	0
CapeTimesSA	Wed Mar 24 09:27:45 +0000 2021	OPINION: As the world watched in awe as China responded to its public heal	0	0
CapeTimesSA	Mon Mar 15 06:44:38 +0000 2021	CoronaVac is an inactivated virus Covid-19 vaccine developed by Sinovac Bid	0	0
pretorianews	Mon Nov 22 10:13:32 +0000 2021	Christian Dior faces criticism in China for photo that 'smears Asian women' ht	0	0
pretorianews	Tue Nov 16 09:55:10 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: You're all invited to join us at "Chinese Embassy webinar"	0	17
pretorianews	Thu Nov 04 16:27:04 +0000 2021	50th anniversary of the restoration of China's lawful seat in the UN https://t.co	0	1
pretorianews	Thu Nov 04 06:53:06 +0000 2021	Global CO2 emissions caused mainly by burning fossil fuels are set to rebour	0	0
pretorianews	Thu Oct 14 09:44:28 +0000 2021	RT @WuPeng_MFACHina: After 5 months of waiting, the prize-winning works	0	26
pretorianews	Tue Oct 05 13:21:59 +0000 2021	Amid global turbulence, China continues to calmly lead https://t.co/HnI9dzNg	0	0
pretorianews	Tue Sep 28 09:41:53 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: Welcome to our #ChinaNationalDay Virtual Reception 2021	0	19
pretorianews	Sun Sep 12 22:20:50 +0000 2021	China to help Afghanistan with US\$31m in emergency aid https://t.co/KKYyQX	1	0
pretorianews	Fri Sep 10 20:35:04 +0000 2021	China to help Afghanistan with US\$31m in emergency aid https://t.co/yKYLm	1	1
TheMercurySA	Tue Nov 16 09:51:59 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: You're all invited to join us at "Chinese Embassy webinar"	0	17
TheMercurySA	Tue Nov 09 11:39:09 +0000 2021	Road to Visionary Common Prosperity ,Äi Some Keywords for Better Underst	0	0
TheMercurySA	Thu Nov 04 16:45:19 +0000 2021	50th anniversary of the restoration of China's lawful seat in the UN https://t.co	0	0
TheMercurySA	Thu Oct 14 09:45:48 +0000 2021	RT @WuPeng_MFACHina: After 5 months of waiting, the prize-winning works	0	26
TheMercurySA	Tue Oct 05 14:44:53 +0000 2021	Amid global turbulence, China continues to calmly lead https://t.co/beKdtxog	1	0
TheMercurySA	Tue Sep 28 09:36:31 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: Welcome to our #ChinaNationalDay Virtual Reception 2021	0	19
TheMercurySA	Thu Sep 02 06:18:52 +0000 2021	Deputy Minister for State Security in the Presidency Zizi Kodwa also distance	2	1
TheMercurySA	Tue Aug 03 14:16:28 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: Both Mr @AkaniSimbine and Mr #SuBingtian are the hero	0	21
TheMercurySA	Tue Jun 15 09:19:57 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: Welcome to join us at the High-Level Dialogue on Celebra	0	10
TheMercurySA	Thu May 20 08:24:32 +0000 2021	#Bitcoin recovered marginally from the previous session's brutal slide to four	0	0
TheStar_news	Tue Nov 16 09:55:52 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: You're all invited to join us at "Chinese Embassy webinar"	0	17
TheStar_news	Thu Oct 14 09:43:31 +0000 2021	RT @WuPeng_MFACHina: After 5 months of waiting, the prize-winning works	0	26
TheStar_news	Tue Sep 28 09:37:56 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: Welcome to our #ChinaNationalDay Virtual Reception 2021	0	19
TheStar_news	Thu Sep 02 06:23:08 +0000 2021	Deputy Minister for State Security in the Presidency Zizi Kodwa also distance	1	0
TheStar_news	Tue Aug 03 14:13:54 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: Both Mr @AkaniSimbine and Mr #SuBingtian are the hero	0	21
TheStar_news	Wed Jul 21 06:43:50 +0000 2021	RT @IOL: WATCH: Terrifying scenes as subway passengers in China trapped i	0	7
TheStar_news	Thu Jul 08 12:51:41 +0000 2021	RT @IOL: MEC Panyaza Lesufi was recorded on video saying the pills a friend	0	72
TheStar_news	Mon Jul 05 10:30:49 +0000 2021	South Africa will soon start rolling out the Sinovac-CoronaVac vaccine manufa	2	1
TheStar_news	Fri Jul 02 09:40:38 +0000 2021	Sahpra CEO says the regulatory body was in an advanced stage of evaluation	0	0
TheStar_news	Tue Jun 22 14:06:20 +0000 2021	To understand modern China, one must understand the history of the Commu	0	1
TheStar_news	Mon Jun 21 15:06:47 +0000 2021	Dr Surv-© says Independent Media and ANA will tell the story of China, #	24	10
TheStar_news	Tue Jun 15 09:18:37 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: Welcome to join us at the High-Level Dialogue on Celebra	0	10
TheStar_news	Thu May 20 08:24:51 +0000 2021	#Bitcoin recovered marginally from the previous session's brutal slide to four	1	1
IOL	Tue Nov 16 09:52:36 +0000 2021	China Media Group has set up a new collaboration platform with Africa https://t.co	4	2
IOL	Fri Nov 26 20:29:47 +0000 2021	Strength of Africa-China partnership under the spotlight at CMG Media Coop	4	0
IOL	Fri Nov 26 20:18:32 +0000 2021	Strength of Africa-China partnership under the spotlight at CMG Media Coop	5	4
IOL	Fri Nov 19 19:41:50 +0000 2021	China-South Africa relations a fine example of China-Africa ties, says envoy h	8	4
IOL	Tue Nov 16 09:52:36 +0000 2021	RT @ChinaAmbSA: You're all invited to join us at "Chinese Embassy webinar"	0	17
IOL	Mon Nov 15 21:09:48 +0000 2021	China, US seek more common ground after COP26 deal https://t.co/FdyTXPC	4	2
IOL	Sun Nov 14 15:26:03 +0000 2021	China donates 500 000 more vaccine doses to Syria https://t.co/X2bEfY1IA3	6	0
IOL	Thu Nov 11 22:01:24 +0000 2021	Communiqu-© of the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of	11	3
IOL	Thu Nov 11 08:11:04 +0000 2021	G20 Summit in Rome: China, # President Xi Jinping calls for greater global	6	2
IOL	Tue Nov 09 16:43:21 +0000 2021	Xi Focus - Close-up: All aboard China's express train to development https://t	11	0
IOL	Tue Nov 09 10:30:15 +0000 2021	Road to Visionary Common Prosperity ,Äi Some Keywords for Better Underst	3	0
IOL	Thu Nov 04 17:30:26 +0000 2021	50th anniversary of the restoration of China's lawful seat in the UN https://t.co	5	1
IOL	Sun Oct 31 08:27:14 +0000 2021	China rejects 'political, false' US report on Covid-19 origins https://t.co/QymJn	11	7
IOL	Sat Oct 30 12:04:17 +0000 2021	Flights cancelled, weddings postponed and people urged to stay home as Ch	6	9
IOL	Fri Oct 29 09:47:43 +0000 2021	Hundreds of flights cancelled as China tackles Covid outbreak https://t.co/Qg	9	4
IOL	Thu Oct 21 11:33:26 +0000 2021	Speaker Mapisa-Nqakula and China, # Li Zhanshu to lead parliamentary dis	3	1

Screenshot of dataset of @TheCapeArgus, @CapeTimesSA, @pretorianews, @TheMercurySA, @TheStar_news, and @IOL China-related tweets. Identical colors indicate identical tweets.

Ebrahim's essay was picked up, editorialized, and promoted by Chinese state media. A September 10 *People's Daily* feature on Ebrahim's essay read, "Investigation of US labs necessary for COVID-19 origins tracing: S. African media."⁵⁶ The Chinese Embassy in South Africa also promoted Ebrahim's article on its webpage the day it was published.⁵⁷

This case study shows a recursive process in which Chinese state sources push a particular narrative; China-funded local news sources like IOL amplify it; and then

Chinese state media editorializes these articles, feeding them back into the South African media ecosystem. Here, state media use the veneer of local reporting to lend credence to a conspiracy theory of Chinese origin.

These activities harm the democratic free press by warping public discourse, as locally relevant issues like COVID-19's origins are filtered through a China-centric lens.

NEWS POLITICS OPINION

Investigation of US labs necessary in pursuit of Covid origins

The WHO released a joint WHO-China study conducted by 34 experts on the origins of Covid-19, which found that a leak from the Wuhan laboratory was highly unlikely. Not only was the laboratory a joint China-France government project which followed international standards, it had never studied the virus, and no staff member had ever contracted it. The US was part of the WHO-China study group, but continues to cast aspersions on the authenticity of the report. But more than 80 countries have supported the joint WHO-China study.

The US has continued to make a case about China's culpability, with President Joe Biden tasking his intelligence agencies to conduct their own study into the origins of Covid-19, which played up the laboratory leak theory. But the US report, which was released on August 27, has been widely criticised for having politicised the issue, and being anti-science.

All this seems to obfuscate what US institutions have been doing in terms of coronavirus research, and in a complete lack of transparency, the US government has closed the US off to origin tracing. China has submitted two non-papers to the WHO on its concerns regarding Fort Detrick in the US – the home base of US biowarfare activities. The US Army Medical Research Institute on Infectious Diseases is the most prominent entity on the base and has been engaged in coronavirus research and modification. What is not widely publicised is that the laboratory suffered a serious safety incident and was shut down in 2019. Shortly thereafter there were outbreaks of disease with symptoms similar to Covid-19 within the US. A petition was sent to the White House in March last year demanding that the US government disclose information about the base, but there was no response.

Home > Embassy Highlights/Media Release

Wang Wenbin: U.S. should invite WHO to probe Fort Detrick and University of North Carolina
2021/08/26

CCTV: It is learned that Permanent Representative of China to the UN Office at Geneva and other International Organizations in Switzerland wrote to the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) the other day, handing over two non-papers on Fort Detrick and the University of North Carolina, as well as an open letter signed by netizens demanding an investigation into Fort Detrick. Could you please elaborate on China's position?

Wang Wenbin: On August 24, Ambassador Chen Xu, Permanent Representative of China to the UN Office at Geneva and other International Organizations in Switzerland, wrote to WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, and submitted two non-papers titled "Doubtful Points about Fort Detrick (USAMRIID)" and "Coronavirus Research Conducted by Dr. Ralph Baric's Team at University of North Carolina", and an open letter signed by more than 25 million Internet users calling for an investigation into the Fort Detrick base.

China's position on the issue of global origins study is consistent and clear. Tracing the origins of the virus is a scientific issue. China always supports and will continue to participate in scientific origins study. The conclusions and recommendations of the China-WHO joint study report have been recognized by the international community and the scientific community, and must be respected and implemented. Future global origins study should and can only be carried out on this basis.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) has received WHO experts twice. It is extremely unlikely that the novel coronavirus was leaked from the WIV – this is the clear conclusion of the China-WHO joint study report. Those who insist that the possibility of a lab-leak cannot be ruled out should investigate Fort Detrick and the University of North Carolina in the principle of fairness and justice.

The fact is, the international community and the American people have long raised serious concerns over the illegal, non-transparent and unsafe practices at the Fort Detrick base. It is the center of US bio-military activities and USAMRIID is the main research entity there. USAMRIID has long been engaged in coronavirus research and modification. After the Institute was shut down because of serious safety incidents in 2019, disease with symptoms similar to that of COVID-19 broke out in the US. The US has not yet given any explanation on these problems to the international community and American people.

As to the University of North Carolina, the US has been falsely accusing the WIV of causing the COVID-19 pandemic with its coronavirus researches. However, it is the US who has sponsored and carried out more such researches than any other country. In particular, the Baric team leads the world in researches in this field, with extremely mature capability in synthesizing and modifying coronavirus. An investigation into Dr. Baric's team and lab will help clarify whether such researches have created or can create SARS-CoV-2.

Comparison of IOL Foreign Editor Shannon Ebrahim's September 3, 2021, article posted to the IOL website⁵⁸ and Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's comments published August 26, 2021.⁵⁹ Highlighted sections indicate similarities.

56 "Investigation of US labs necessary for COVID-19 origins tracing: S. African media," *People's Daily*, September 10, 2021, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2021/0910/c90000-9894745.html>.

57 "南非知名主编:有必要调查美国实验室以进行新冠病毒溯源" ("Well-known editor-in-chief in South Africa: It is necessary to investigate the US laboratory for the traceability of the new crown virus"), Embassy of People's Republic of China in the Republic of South Africa, September 3, 2021, http://za.china-embassy.org/chn/dshdxwfb/202109/t20210904_9077244.htm.

58 Ebrahim, "Investigation of US labs necessary."

59 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Commonwealth of Australia, media release, Wang Wenbin: US should invite WHO.

China in Latin America

Latin America is a relative newcomer in China's discourse power strategy. This is due in part to geography, as the region is separated from mainland China by a vast body of water; it also sits in what the United States views as its traditional sphere of influence; the United States today is the region's largest economic and security partner.⁶⁰ However, as with other regions in the Global South, the exposure of Latin American countries to China has dramatically increased over the past decade as Beijing's discourse power operations have expanded.

Of particular interest to Beijing in Latin America are the region's relations with Taiwan. Of the fourteen countries that diplomatically recognize the island, eight are in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁶¹ China considers convincing those that still maintain diplomatic recognition of Taiwan to sever ties as being in Beijing's core national interest, and this serves as a prominent feature of China's discourse power operations in the region.

As is the case in the Global South more broadly, China's foothold in Latin America deepened under its "Going Out" policy, when it began increasing direct investments abroad. The year 2015 alone saw a more than 71 percent year-over-year increase in Chinese investment in Latin America.⁶² Initially, China's interest in the region was largely limited to economic and commercial considerations. When China issued its first policy paper on Latin America and the Caribbean in 2008, the document outlined areas of cooperation, largely focusing on the importance of economic ties.⁶³

As China began to focus more intently on its discourse power strategy, its engagements with Latin American countries evolved. In July 2014, China established the China-CELAC Forum, which aimed at deepening cooperation to a "new level," including enhanced economic,

security, political, and diplomatic cooperation.⁶⁴ China established strategic partnerships with Bolivia, Costa Rica, and Uruguay while elevating seven of its existing partnerships in the region to the highest level of "comprehensive strategic partnerships."⁶⁵

Subsequent policy pronouncements have illustrated China's aim to leverage this "new level" of cooperation to achieve its discourse power-related goals.⁶⁶ For example, forum documents, including the China-CELAC Cooperation Plan (2015–2019) and the Joint Plan of Action for Cooperation on Priority Areas (2019–2021), emphasized recognition of the "One China Principle" and underscored support for China's reunification with Taiwan; they also extolled the virtues of China's development paradigm of "building a community with a shared future."⁶⁷ For China, such language is important to its discourse power goals because it codifies and legitimizes Chinese principles and even geopolitical stances at the institutional level.

Along with its efforts through the China-CELAC Forum, China has stepped up engagement with political party leaders at local, state, and federal levels through the CCP's ILD. The ILD is a party body aimed at popularizing and promoting CCP policies to socialist political parties.⁶⁸ From 2002 to 2017, the ILD held nearly three hundred meetings with seventy-four different political parties in twenty-six countries in Latin America.⁶⁹ These engagements focused on gaining political support for China's activities and initiatives in international forums, proselytizing the efficacy of its authoritarian governance system, and spreading positive messages about China's role in COVID-19 pandemic recovery efforts.⁷⁰

China uses this growing network of local-level ties to achieve political objectives. For example, in 2021, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro publicly stated that Brazil would not buy Chinese vaccines. In response, China leveraged its local connections to negotiate with stakeholders at the subnational level in the state of São Paulo, eventually

60 *China's Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean*, US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Staff Research Report, October 17, 2018, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-engagement-latin-america-and-caribbean>.

61 "Diplomatic Allies," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan), accessed February 17, 2022, archived at <https://archive.fo/2b3Y6>.

62 Patrick Gillespie, "China's big chess move against the U.S.: Latin America," CNN, March 4, 2015, <https://money.cnn.com/2015/03/04/news/economy/china-latin-america-relations-united-states/>.

63 "中国对拉丁美洲和加勒比政策文件(全文)" ["China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean (full text)"], Xinhua, November 5, 2008, http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2008-11/05/content_1140303.htm.

64 "Basic Information about China-CELAC Forum," Department of Latin American and Caribbean Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, April 2016, <http://www.chinacelacforum.org/eng/tj/1/201612/P020210828094665781093.pdf>.

65 Elena Chuquimarca, "Interview: Chinese President's Visit Marks New Stage of Relations with Latin America," Xinhua, November 26, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-11/26/c_135860122.htm.

66 "Basic Information about China-CELAC Forum," Department of Latin American and Caribbean Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China.

67 "中国与拉美和加勒比国家合作规划(2015-2019)" ["Cooperation Plan between China and Latin American and Caribbean Countries (2015-2019)"], China-CELAC Forum, January 21, 2015, http://www.chinacelacforum.org/chn/zywj/201501/t20150121_6284980.htm; and "中国与拉共体成员国优先领域合作共同行动计划(2019 共同体成员国)" ["Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Priority Areas between China and CELAC Member States (2019 CELAC Member States)"], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, February 22, 2018, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/201802/t20180202_7947812.shtml.

68 Neil Thomas, "Proselytizing Power: The Party Wants the World to Learn from Its Experiences," MacroPolo, January 22, 2020, <https://macropolo.org/international-liaison-department-ccp/?rp=m>.

69 Christine Hackenesch and Julia Bader, "The Struggle for Minds and Influence: The Chinese Communist Party's Global Outreach," *International Studies Quarterly* 64 (3) (2020): 723–733, <https://www.die-gdi.de/en/others-publications/article/the-struggle-for-minds-and-influence-the-chinese-communist-partys-global-outreach/>.

70 Han Han, "2019年度拉美左翼与社会主义论坛第三次会议暨'2018-2019年——处于变革进程的古巴'学术报告会召开" ("The third meeting of the 2019 Latin American Forum on Leftism and Socialism and the academic report on '2018-2019—Cuba in the Process of Change' was held"), Institute of Latin American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, July 22, 2019, archived at <https://archive.fo/9RjSB>; and Xu Rui, "中国共产党与拉美共产党和左翼政党的交往学术研讨会综述·术研" ("A summary of the academic seminar on the exchanges between the Communist Party of China and the Communist Party of Latin America and left-wing parties, technical research"), Institute of Latin American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, May 11, 2021, archived at <https://archive.fo/MrNig>.

establishing a center for Chinese vaccine producer Sinovac to manufacture vaccines for national distribution.⁷¹

To complement this growing diplomatic network, China has sought to “borrow a boat out to sea” by building up its state media presence in the region. In Latin America, China sees an opportunity to sow messages of US decline, especially through its Spanish-language state media branch, Xinhua Español.⁷² In addition, state media, including *People's Daily* and CGTN, produce both Spanish and Portuguese-language content in the region, and state media groups have established content-sharing partnerships in Brazil, Chile, and Venezuela.⁷³ Chinese state outlets also supply content to several regional outlets, including Agência Brasil, *Granma* (Cuba), and *La Tercera* (Chile). Media outlet teleSUR, which is backed by the regime of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro, dedicates an entire section of its website to republishing Xinhua content on a daily basis.⁷⁴ This media cooperation is slated to deepen. In December 2021, CGTN announced an agreement with thirty media organizations from Latin America designed to increase cooperation and “enhance consensus.”⁷⁵

The start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 saw a concerted push by Chinese state media to capitalize on its inroads in Latin America to shape the region's perception of China's global and regional response to the outbreak. In Latin America, this included spreading a view of China as a global leader and alternative aspirational model beside the failing US model. As a few examples, one translated April 2021 headline from Xinhua Español reads, “Sinovac supplies 260 million COVID-19 vaccines globally;”⁷⁶ another

states, “Chinese laboratory vaccine Sinovac has proven to be very effective, highlights Chilean minister;”⁷⁷ while a July 2021 article highlights, “New batch of Sinovac vaccine from China against COVID-19 arrives in Ecuador.”⁷⁸ Others attack the United States directly, including one headline from August 2021 that reads, “The United States cannot disguise its failure during the pandemic by smearing China: ambassador.”⁷⁹ Xinhua Español even posted a video with Spanish subtitles spreading the Fort Detrick conspiracy theory.⁸⁰

There is evidence to suggest that China's efforts are yielding dividends. In 2016, when a tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled that China's claims to islands in the South China Sea were without legal foundation, Dominica, Grenada, and Venezuela issued public support for China's position.⁸¹ In 2019, Bolivia, Cuba, and Venezuela signed a joint letter to the United Nations Human Rights Council and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights defending China's position on Xinjiang.⁸² In 2020, Cuba, Dominica, Grenada, Nicaragua, and Venezuela supported a similar joint statement at the UN.⁸³ Later that same year, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela signed a UN statement supporting China's imposition of its National Security Law in Hong Kong.⁸⁴

China has also earned backing from a growing number of Latin American countries to support its appointees to multilateral institutions.⁸⁵ This includes in key international standards-setting bodies, where China has leveraged the deep involvement of telecom companies like Huawei and ZTE in Latin American regional infrastructure to shape the international rules of commerce.⁸⁶

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- 71 Samantha Pearson and Ryan Dube, “Brazil Embraces Chinese Covid-19 Vaccine as Cases Soar,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/brazil-embraces-chinese-covid-19-vaccine-as-cases-soar-11610146348>; and Mauricio Savarese, “Sao Paulo authorities plead with China to release vaccines,” *Associated Press*, May 12, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/sao-paulo-china-coronavirus-pandemic-business-global-trade-b455cc1c8a971fd1b72230e3b6be7b3>.
- 72 For an example, see: “Expertos critican el manejo de COVID-19 en Estados Unidos” (“Experts criticize the United States’ handling of COVID-19”), *Xinhua Español*, January 22, 2021, http://spanish.xinhuanet.com/americaelnorte/2021-01/22/c_139687932.htm.
- 73 Ricardo Barrios, “China's state media in Latin America: profile and prospects,” *Asia Dialogue*, May 28, 2018, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2018/05/28/chinese-state-media-in-latin-america-profile-and-prospects/>.
- 74 *Ibid.*
- 75 “CGTN launches China-Latin America Media Action project,” *CGTN*, December 2, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-12-02/CGTN-launches-China-Latin-America-media-action-15FFelhtDk4/index.html>.
- 76 “Sinovac suministra 260 millones de vacunas contra COVID-19 a nivel mundial” (“Sinovac supplies 260 million COVID-19 vaccines globally”), *Xinhua Español*, April 21, 2021, http://spanish.xinhuanet.com/2021-04/21/c_139894480.htm.
- 77 “Vacuna de laboratorio chino Sinovac ha probado ser muy efectiva, destaca ministro chileno” (“Chinese laboratory vaccine Sinovac has proven to be very effective, highlights Chilean minister”), *Xinhua Español*, April 19, 2021, http://spanish.xinhuanet.com/2021-04/19/c_139889244.htm.
- 78 “Llega a Ecuador nuevo lote de vacuna de Sinovac de China contra COVID-19,” (“New batch of Sinovac vaccine from China against COVID-19 arrives in Ecuador”), *Xinhua Español*, July 8, 2021, http://spanish.xinhuanet.com/2021-07/08/c_1310048937.htm.
- 79 “Estados Unidos no puede disimular su fracaso durante pandemia difamando a China: embajador” (“The United States cannot disguise its failure during the pandemic by defaming China: ambassador”), August 31, 2021, *Xinhua Español*, http://spanish.news.cn/2021-08/31/c_1310159588.htm.
- 80 “Cibernetas chinos sacan vídeo sobre Fort Detrick de Estados Unidos” (“Chinese netizens release video about US Fort Detrick”), *Xinhua Español*, August 21, 2021, http://spanish.xinhuanet.com/2021-08/20/c_1310136486.htm.
- 81 Wang Wen and Chen Xiaochen, “Who Supports China in the South China Sea and Why,” *Diplomat*, July 27, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/who-supports-china-in-the-south-china-sea-and-why/>.
- 82 Catherine Putz, “2020 Edition: Which Countries Are For or Against China's Xinjiang Policies?” *Diplomat*, October 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/2020-edition-which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>.
- 83 *Ibid.*
- 84 Shannon Tiezzi, “Which Countries Support China on Hong Kong's National Security Law?” *Diplomat*, October 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/which-countries-support-china-on-hong-kongs-national-security-law/>.
- 85 *China's Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean*, Congressional Research Service, updated December 14, 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10982>.
- 86 Raymond R. Dua Jr., “The rise of Chinese technology in Latin America,” *Global Americans*, August 12, 2020, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2020/08/the-rise-of-chinese-technology-in-latin-america/>; and Jorge Malena, *The Extension of the Digital Silk Road to Latin America: Advantages and Potential Risks*, Council on Foreign Relations and Brazilian Center for International Relations, January 19, 2021, <https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/jorgemalenadsr.pdf>.

China has also successfully persuaded several countries to switch diplomatic recognition away from Taiwan. China induced Panama to switch diplomatic recognition in 2017, followed by the Dominican Republic and El Salvador in 2018.⁸⁷ China has also leveraged promises of assistance in managing the COVID-19 pandemic to pressure Paraguay and Honduras to break relations with Taiwan, though these efforts have yet to be successful.⁸⁸ In December 2021, Nicaragua was the latest Latin American country to break relations with Taiwan to the benefit of China.⁸⁹

As China's investment in the region grows, and its political and diplomatic engagement follows, Latin American countries will face increasing pressure to fall in line with China's interests or face exclusion. With the added pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic on the region's economies, China's financial backing through the BRI is increasingly essential to sustain the region's growth.⁹⁰

Among the countries in the region, China may find certain ones more eager to serve as "international friends" in spreading Chinese propaganda. Recent scholarly analysis has found that Latin American countries under presidents with left-wing ideology (including Left and Center Left) have a much more positive view of China than countries under presidents with other ideological preferences.⁹¹ The case study below on Venezuela illustrates the symbiotic relationship between autocratic media practices and China's discourse power aims.

Case study: Pro-China messaging amplified in Venezuela's "Hashtag of the Day"⁹²

Venezuela plays an important role in China's diplomatic efforts both in Latin America and on the broader international stage. China sees the Maduro regime as a valuable vector to help foster consensus for its model of international relations and to bolster its narrative of the United States as an unworthy global leader. By leveraging its soft power, China receives a messaging boost from Venezuela as it pointedly praises Beijing in public, while Venezuela gets to stick its thumb in the eye of the United States.

This case study illustrates how Twitter accounts connected to the Venezuelan state or affiliated with its supporters spread narratives favorable to both China and the Maduro regime on Venezuelan social media while attacking the United States and its allies in the country. The DFRLab focused on China's March 2021 vaccine diplomacy in Venezuela as a starting point to examine these trends. The pro-Maduro effort used a China-style social control program to reward citizens who inorganically amplified Maduro's propaganda on Twitter.

After China delivered five hundred thousand doses of its Sinopharm vaccine to Venezuela on March 1, 2021, Twitter accounts belonging to Maduro regime supporters, high-ranking officials, and Maduro himself expressed gratitude and praise for Xi's help in fighting the pandemic in Venezuela.⁹³ The accounts also attributed "the blockade" of Venezuelan immunization efforts to the economic sanctions imposed by the United States on Maduro and high-ranking regime officials.⁹⁴

87 Elida Moreno and Philip Wen, "Panama establishes ties with China, ditches Taiwan in win for Beijing," Reuters, June 12, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-panama-china/panama-establishes-ties-with-china-ditches-taiwan-in-win-for-beijing-idUSKBN194054>; Austin Ramzay, "Taiwan's Diplomatic Isolation Increases as Dominican Republic Recognizes China," New York Times, May 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/01/world/asia/taiwan-dominican-republic-recognize.html>; and Chris Horton, "El Salvador Recognizes China in Blow to Taiwan," New York Times, August 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/world/asia/taiwan-el-salvador-diplomatic-ties.html>.

88 Ernesto Londoño, "Paraguay's 'Life and Death' Covid Crisis Gives China Diplomatic Opening," New York Times, April 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/16/world/americas/paraguay-china-vaccine-diplomacy.html>.

89 "Nicaragua seizes former Taiwan embassy to give it to China," Associated Press, December 27, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/religion-china-caribbean-taiwan-nicaragua-b6fd5f0a5b13d02393d583d6c6566c8c>.

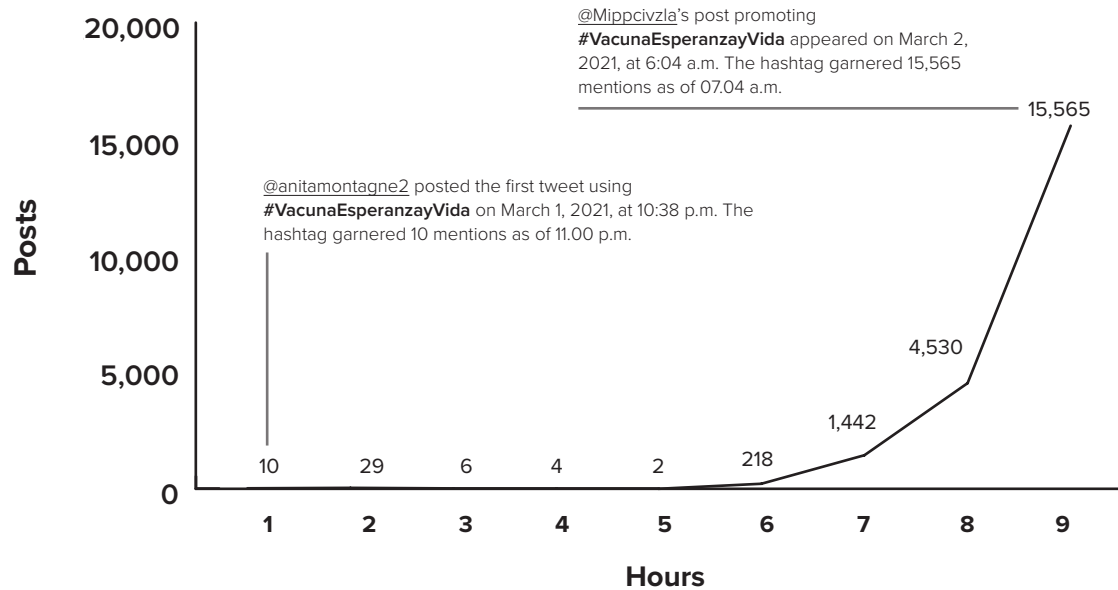
90 Ciara Nugent and Charlie Campell, "The U.S. and China Are Battling for Influence in Latin America, and the Pandemic Has Raised the Stakes," Times, February 4, 2021, <https://time.com/5936037/us-china-latin-america-influence/>.

91 Yi Feng and Qingjie Bob Zeng, "Economic relations and the public image of China in Latin America: a cross-country time-series analysis," *Economic and Political Studies*, 2021: 1–27. Note: Ideologies are identified as: Left, Center Left, Center, Center Right, and Right. The data are from: Maria Victoria Murillo, Virginia Oliveros, and Milan Vaishnav, "Dataset on Political Ideology of Presidents and Parties in Latin America," Columbia University, 2010. Post-2010 data in the article were coded according to the criteria in Murillo, Oliveros, and Vaishnav 2010.

92 The full report that forms the basis of this case study can be found here: Pérez and Thibaut, "Pro-China messaging," <https://medium.com/dfirlab/pro-china-messaging-amplified-in-venezuelas-hashtag-of-the-day-2f6bc704264>.

93 For example, Eneida Laya Lugo (@EneidaLayaPsv), "#2Mar Nos sentimos complacidos y agradecidos por la llegada de vacunas Sinopharm e insumos médicos desde la República Popular China para el combate contra el Covid-19, venciendo el bloqueo para seguir," Twitter, March 2, 2021, 9:51 a.m., <https://twitter.com/EneidaLayaPsv/status/1366763060552228872>.

94 MIPPCI (@Mippcivzla), "#2Mar ¡ETIQUETA DEL DÍA! #VacunaEsperanzaYVida Venezuela garantiza la protección del pueblo contra la Covid-19. No existe bloqueo que detenga," Twitter, March 2, 2021, 6:04 a.m., <https://twitter.com/Mippcivzla/status/136670598623751072>; and US Department of the Treasury, Treasury Sanctions the President of Venezuela, press release, July 31, 2017, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/sm0137.aspx>.



Line graph showing the number of posts per hour using #VacunaEsperanzayVida between March 1 and March 2, 2021. The first peak of mentions of #VacunaEsperanzayVida appeared following @Mippcivzla's March 2 post stating that it would be the Etiqueta del Día (Hashtag of the Day) at 6:04 a.m.⁹⁵



Most active accounts

March 1, 10:38 p.m., to March 2, 6:03 a.m.

Account	Posts	Status
@pancho2360	236	Suspended
@arturo03807596	228	Suspended
@PatriciaGerarda	227	Suspended
@Naudylopez5	142	Suspended
@yacosoaloaiza6	125	Suspended
@vistarevolucio7	107	Suspended
@Luziuz100380	99	Suspended
@mariaeu63691338	99	Suspended
@johan37293350	95	Active
@amorelovemi	94	Suspended

March 2, 6:04 a.m., to 7:04 a.m.

Account	Posts	Status
@jorgeca93689988	288	Active
@juancaribe02	265	Active
@juanrod82989597	262	Active
@Nereimali1	250	Active
@jlcu2030	246	Suspended
@Hernan59922540	244	Suspended
@cmatuitera02	243	Suspended
@leonorivarez3	235	Suspended
@joseePatria	225	Suspended
@rubendel77	224	Active

Tables showing the ten most active accounts to use #VacunaEsperanzayVida before (left) and after (right) @Mippcivzla's post promoting the hashtag as Etiqueta del Día (Hashtag of the Day). As of January 13, 2022, Twitter had suspended 13 accounts (red).

⁹⁵ DFRLab via Meltwater.

Accounts belonging to the Maduro regime, including some displaying bot-like features and inauthentic behavior, amplified #VacunaEsperanzayVida as a hashtag for the regime's *Etiqueta del Día* ("Hashtag of the Day") campaign, which it uses on an almost daily basis to manipulate Twitter's trending topics and portray messages containing pro-Maduro hashtags as more popular than they actually are.⁹⁶

Taking advantage of Venezuela's dire economic situation to secure the support of its citizens, the regime relies on *sistema patria* (homeland system), a social program that uses smart-card ID known as the "*carnet de la patria*" (homeland card), which Chinese state-controlled company ZTE helped establish.⁹⁷ When using their Twitter accounts to amplify hashtags of the day, Venezuelans have access to rewards and payments through "bonuses" paid to their smart card.⁹⁸ In practice, this system rewards inorganic behavior online—specifically the incentivized promotion of a hashtag instead of organic support—in exchange for monetary compensation in a country where the economy has continued to marginalize a majority of the population.

Before midnight on March 1, 2021, Maduro posted a photo on Twitter showing a commercial jet after it supposedly landed with five hundred thousand doses of the recently approved Sinopharm vaccine.⁹⁹ In the tweet, Maduro announced that a mass vaccination plan would soon start in Venezuela. In a follow-up tweet, Maduro thanked Xi and the Chinese people for their "cooperation and solidarity."¹⁰⁰

According to a search using social media listening tool Meltwater, the pro-Maduro account¹⁰¹ @anitamontagne2 posted the first tweet using #VacunaEsperanzayVida on March 1, 2021, at 10:38 p.m. local time.¹⁰² The following day, March 2, at 6:04 a.m., @Mippcivzla, the account for Maduro's Ministry of Communications and Information,

posted and promoted #VacunaEsperanzayVida as the official hashtag of the day.¹⁰³

Over the seven and a half hours leading up to the @Mippcivzla tweet, accounts posted #VacunaEsperanzayVida in 5,388 retweets, 419 quote tweets, thirteen replies, and 421 original tweets; retweets and quotes comprised 92 percent of all mentions. In the hour following the @Mippcivzla tweet, the hashtag garnered 13,428 retweets, 1,054 quote tweets, 170 replies, and 913 original tweets; retweets and quotes made up 93 percent of all mentions.

According to the CTM (Coefficient of Traffic Manipulation) method of measuring inauthentic behavior on Twitter, along with previous monitoring analyzing Venezuela's Twitter behavior, a retweet/quote to original tweet ratio of more than 85 percent during both timeframes is an indicator of traffic manipulation.¹⁰⁴

As shown in the tables below, the twenty most active accounts in both timeframes posted the #VacunaEsperanzayVida hashtag between ninety-four and 288 times. Twitter has since suspended thirteen of these accounts.¹⁰⁵

According to trending Twitter topic monitoring tool GetDayTrends, the hashtag was the top trending topic on Twitter in Venezuela on March 2 and March 3, 2021.¹⁰⁶ After March 3, the activity around the hashtag swiftly decreased, indicating that the hashtag campaign was likely motivated by the news about China's donation of COVID-19 vaccines.

According to a search using Meltwater, an additional 5,103 accounts used #VenezuelaEsperanzayVida alongside keywords relating to US sanctions in 24,000 posts. Among the most retweeted accounts were Maduro supporters,¹⁰⁷ pro-Maduro social influencers,¹⁰⁸ and Maduro party members.

96 *Digital Autocracy: Maduro's control of the Venezuelan information environment*, Digital Forensic Research Lab and Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, Atlantic Council, March 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/DigitalAutocracyVEN-FINAL.pdf>.

97 Angus Berwick, "Como ZTE ayuda a Venezuela a implementar un control social al estilo chino" ("How ZTE helps Venezuela create China-style social control"), Reuters, November 14, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/venezuela-zte-es/>.

98 Jordan F., "Homeland card and homeland system: four questions to understand their differences and scope," *eldiario*, April 10, 2021, https://eldiario-com.translate.goog/2021/04/10/carnet-de-la-patria-y-sistema-patria-diferencia-alcance/?_x_tr_sl=es&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=de.

99 Nicolás Maduro (@NicolasMaduro), "Con gran alegría informo que en este instante están llegando a Venezuela 500 Mil dosis de vacunas contra el Covid-19, provenientes de la República Popular China. Una maravillosa noticia que," Twitter, March 1, 2021, 10:04 p.m., <https://twitter.com/NicolasMaduro/status/1366585067154378757>; and MPPS (@MinSaludVE), "#Atención Venezuela ha aprobado el uso de la vacuna china Sinopharm para inmunizar al pueblo venezolano frente al COVID-19. Gracias a la cooperación," Twitter, March 1, 2021, 4:33 p.m., <https://twitter.com/MinSaludVE/status/1366501918290370564>.

100 Nicolás Maduro (@NicolasMaduro), "En nombre del Pueblo de Venezuela, agradezco a nuestro hermano Presidente Xi Jinping y al noble pueblo chino, por su inquebrantable espíritu de cooperación," Twitter, March 1, 2021, 10:07 p.m., <https://twitter.com/NicolasMaduro/status/1366585964395712512>.

101 "Chavistas hostigan a periodista Gregoria Díaz por informar sobre covid-19" ("Chavistas harass journalist Gregoria Díaz for reporting on covid-19"), *TalCual*, April 14, 2021, <https://talcualdigital.com/sntp-denuncia-hostigamiento-contra-periodista-gregoria-diaz-por-trabajo-sobre-covid-19/>.

102 Anita Montagne (@anitamontagne2), "Excelentes noticias Pdte." @NicolasMaduro #VacunaEsperanzaYVida," Twitter, March 2, 2021, 3:38 a.m. GMT, archived at <https://archive.ph/yn4t5>.

103 MIPPCI (@Mippcivzla), " #2Mar ¡ETIQUETA DEL DÍA! #VacunaEsperanzaYVida Venezuela garantiza la protección del pueblo contra la Covid-19. No existe bloqueo que detenga," Twitter, March 2, 2021, 6:04 a.m., <https://twitter.com/Mippcivzla/status/1366705986237571072>.

104 Ben Nimmo, *Measuring Traffic Manipulation on Twitter*, (Oxford, UK: University of Oxford, 2019), 1–35, <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/01/Manipulating-Twitter-Traffic.pdf>; and "#AlertaVenezuela: February 9, 2021," Digital Forensic Research Lab, Atlantic Council, February 9, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-february-9-2021/>.

105 DFRLab via Meltwater; and Pérez and Thibaut, "Pro-China messaging amplified."

106 DFRLab via GetDayTrends, query on February 18, 2022, archived at <https://archive.fo/38j4r>.

107 For example, María Lorena (@mmarquez_y), "No existe bloqueo que detenga la voluntad de un gobierno socialista #VacunaEsperanzaYVida @mercedeslouzaod @Vilma_Meche @guzzy_9 @7chiz @Vistarevolucio7 @edelyisa @YuniBurgos," Twitter, March 2, 2021, 7:22 a.m., https://twitter.com/mmarquez_y/status/1366725476228694018.

108 For example, Beba (@BEBANEGRA), "#SemanaRadicalConsciente Yo aquí esperando que van a hacer con los Miles de #ComunicadoresSociales @NicolasMaduro @Mippcivzla estamos en espera porque el pajarraco nos da hasta," Twitter, August 23, 2021, 12:40 p.m., <https://twitter.com/BEBANEGRA/status/1429845918942121992>.

The above case study highlights the symbiotic relationship between inauthentic activity that serves to prop up an autocratic regime and China's discourse power goals. China received positive coverage from the network of inorganic assets, while Venezuela was able to blame the United States for its troubles.

China in the Middle East

Over the past decade, China has transitioned from playing a “shallow” role in the Middle East guided largely by its need for energy resources to now acting as an important extra-regional player.¹⁰⁹ As in the case of the Global South more broadly, China's interests have grown to beyond the economic and security realms to those that sit at the core of its discourse power goals. China's discourse power efforts in the Middle East focus on eroding US influence by undermining the merits of democracy while promoting its principle of noninterference. It also emphasizes China's role as a “peace broker” through its position on Syria and Israeli-Palestinian issues. China also uses its ostensible support for anti-terror measures in the region as a veneer to gain support for its repression of Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang. And while its media presence is not as established as in other regions, its footprint is growing.

China began investing in earnest in the Middle East after the 2013 launch of the BRI. By 2016, it had displaced the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United States as the largest foreign investors in the region, as it now holds 32 percent of foreign direct investment and other investments totaling \$30 billion.¹¹⁰ As its economic footprint grew, China began to deepen its diplomatic and political engagement. One of the most important multilateral forums through which China enhances its diplomatic presence in the region is the CASC, which coordinates relations between China and the twenty-two Arab League states.

China uses the CASC to advance its discourse power priorities among Arabic-speaking countries.¹¹¹ The foundational norms of political cooperation in the forum are China's “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” which, among other values, emphasize Chinese notions of mutual noninterference in

the internal affairs of other states. China routinely signals its adherence to noninterference on the international stage. As of December 2021, China has vetoed ten UN Security Council resolutions on Syria, claiming they violate the country's sovereignty and China's principle of noninterference.¹¹²

Following Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's March 2021 trip to six countries in the Middle East, China outlined its regional priorities more formally in a “five-point initiative” for its relations with the region. These points include China's “support for non-interference in Middle Eastern countries' internal affairs” and “support for countries to escape from the shadow of major power geopolitical rivalry.” The remaining three points outline China's role in the region—that it “respects the independent choices of countries in the region,” that it will not “engage in geopolitical competition,” and that it values its own role as a peace broker and contributor to the “peaceful development” of the region.¹¹³ To this end, Chinese talking points often emphasize China's longstanding opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, its opposition to the use of military force in Libya, its role as a mediator in negotiations over the Iranian nuclear issue, and its facilitating role in the peace process between the government of Israel and the Palestinians.¹¹⁴

China has increased its focus on its principle of noninterference, especially as the influence of the United States has waned in recent years, seeing an opportunity to present itself as a better partner than Western countries, given the latter's history of interventionism in the region.

For example, following the United States' Summit for Democracy in December 2021, China took the opportunity to criticize Western concepts of democracy and to emphasize its solidarity with Middle Eastern countries. At a press conference addressing the issue, Wang, China's foreign minister, stated that whether a country is democratic and values human rights is “up to its own country to decide” and said China “opposed the use of democracy and human rights by certain countries to point fingers at other countries.” Wang also castigated the United States specifically, stating: “The United States instigates regime change by engaging in color revolutions and seeks geopolitical interests through military intervention at every turn.... The ‘Arab Spring’

109 Jon B. Alterman and John W. Garver, *Vital Triangle: China, the United States, and the Middle East*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Significant Issues Series* 30 (2) (2008), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/080624_alterman_vitaltriangle.pdf.

110 Charles W. Dunne, “China's Belt and Road Initiative and US Middle East Policy,” Arab Center Washington DC, January 13, 2021, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-and-us-middle-east-policy/>. See also: “China is largest foreign investor in Middle East,” Middle East Monitor, July 24, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170724-china-is-largest-foreign-investor-in-middle-east/>.

111 Jonathan Fulton, “China's emergence as a Middle East power” in *Routledge Handbook on China-Middle East Relations*, ed. Jonathan Fulton (New York: Routledge, 2021), 5.

112 “China's ambassador explains second veto of UN Security Council resolution on Syria aid,” CGTN, July 11, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-07-11/China-ambassador-explains-second-veto-on-Syria-aid-via-Turkey--S1ZtJXY6Os/index.html>; and Zhong Sheng, “China: No interference in Syria's internal affairs,” People's Daily, October 13, 2011, <http://en.people.cn/90780/7616513.html>.

113 “中国是中东国家长期可靠的战略伙伴” (“China is a long-term and reliable strategic partner of Middle East countries”), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 30, 2021, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/t206_676234/xgxw_676240/202103/t20210330_9180924.shtml.

114 Jin Liangxiang, “Beyond Economics in the Middle East,” China-US Focus, January 7, 2022, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/beyond-economics-in-the-middle-east>.

promoted in the name of fake democracy has instead caused millions of casualties and displacement of tens of millions of people.... China and Middle Eastern countries should firmly follow their own path.”¹¹⁵

In addition to pushing Chinese-developed norms, Beijing has leveraged its bilateral relations and its role in the CASCf to gain support for core issues, including its approach to the Xinjiang region in northwest China. Around three thousand three hundred ethnic Muslim Uyghurs from the region have been identified as fighting in militant groups in Syria,¹¹⁶ which China uses as a basis to spread a narrative that its suppression and detentions of Uyghur Muslims within its borders contributes to broader anti-terror efforts in the Middle East.¹¹⁷

Several Middle Eastern countries, including Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the UAE, and Yemen, have publicly supported China's position on the Xinjiang issue in the UN Human Rights Council.¹¹⁸ China has also sought support through the CASCf for its contested claims over island chains in the South China Sea. Following the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which declared China's claims as illegal, the CASCf echoed China's perspective in a joint statement that declared that the relevant countries should “settle the disputes bilaterally.”¹¹⁹

A number of Middle Eastern countries also issued public support for Beijing's hosting of the 2022 Winter Olympics, even as several Western countries engaged in diplomatic boycotts to protest China's treatment of Uyghurs. In a January 2022 call with UAE's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Wang, China's foreign minister, thanked the Emirati minister for his country's “understanding and support of China's proposition of issues concerning its core interests” and reiterated China's support for the UAE to pursue a “development path that suits its national conditions,” Chinese parlance for noninterference and human rights issues as part of a country's “internal affairs.”¹²⁰

In conjunction with its diplomatic initiatives, China has also stepped up its media presence in both Arabic and Persian-speaking countries, which saw a concerted push during the outbreak of the pandemic. In March 2020, for example, CGTN published a video on its Arabic-language news channel to “combat COVID-19 disinformation” stating that it was likely that “patient zero in China came from outside China” while urging “transparency from other governments” (i.e., the United States).¹²¹ In a February 2021 article, Israel-based newspaper *Haaretz* found that Xinhua's Arabic-language coverage featured “a much more blatant attempt to peddle pro-Communist Party messages in Arabic than in English.”¹²²

Haaretz also determined that the coverage largely focused on positive messaging of China's economic development paradigm in the Middle East, which depicted China as a “champion of the Global South” and a responsible stakeholder in its conflict resolution efforts in the region (in opposition to the United States and other Western countries, which China often criticizes as imperialist and interventionist).¹²³ One commentary on Xinhua's Arabic-language site, titled “The envious skeptics of the Belt and Road will not prevail,” highlighted that “transport projects under the Belt and Road Initiative could, by 2030, help lift 7.6 million people out of extreme poverty and 32 million people out of moderate poverty globally.”¹²⁴ Meanwhile, a featured interview from December 2021, titled “Former UN independent expert: Shame on America spending so much on wars and weapons,” quoted a former UN official as stating, “[US arms manufacturers] are very happy with their profits...[and] every war we launch brings profits to them, and misery to millions upon millions of people.”¹²⁵

China's Persian-language media efforts are comparatively less developed. Though the Chinese state broadcasting service CRI began broadcasting its Persian-language service as early as 1957, it has a minor reach among the Iranian public.¹²⁶ China.com, a state-affiliated

115 “坚定自主自立信念 走团结自强之路” (“Firmly believe in self-reliance and take the road of unity and self-improvement”), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 15, 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_677172/xgxw_677178/202201/t20220115_10497492.shtml.

116 Gerry Shih, “AP Exclusive: Uighurs fighting in Syria take aim at China,” Associated Press, December 22, 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/syria-ap-top-news-riots-international-news-china-79d6a427b26f4eeab226571956dd256e>.

117 Dawn C. Murphy, “Chinese diplomatic outreach to MENA: Cooperation forums and special envoys” in *Routledge Handbook on China–Middle East Relations*, ed. Jonathan Fulton (New York: Routledge, 2022), 387.

118 Putz, “2020 Edition: Which Countries Are For.”

119 “The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of Philippines v. The People's Republic of China),” Permanent Court of Arbitration, <https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/77/>; and Murphy, “Chinese diplomatic outreach,” 387.

120 “王毅同阿联酋外交与国际合作部长阿卜杜拉举行电话会晤” (“Wang Yi Holds Telephone Meeting with UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Abdullah”), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 13, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbj_673089/zyhd_673091/202201/t20220113_10495304.shtml.

121 Shaina Oppenheimer, “What Do Chinese Media Outlets Say About the Middle East? Depends Which Language You're Reading,” *Haaretz*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/premium/MAGAZINE-what-does-chinese-media-say-about-the-mideast-depends-which-language-you-re-reading-1.9532023>.

122 Ibid.

123 Ibid.

124 “تعليق (شينخوا): المتشككون الحاسدون لمبادرة الحزام والطريق لن تكون لهم العلية” (“Xinhua Comment: The envious skeptics of the Belt and Road Initiative will not prevail”), arabic.news.cn, December 1, 2021, http://arabic.news.cn/2021-12/01/c_1310345120.htm.

125 “مقابلة: خبير مستقل سابق في الأمم المتحدة عار على أمريكا أن تنفق الكثير على الحروب والأسلحة” (“Interview: Former UN independent expert: Shame on America spending so much on wars and weapons”), arabic.news.cn, December 8, 2021, http://arabic.news.cn/2021-12/08/c_1310359014.htm.

126 “CRIOnline,” <https://persian.cri.cn/>.

website that popularizes Chinese government talking points and promotes a positive view of China's model of economic development, also has a Persian-language version, though it is difficult to assess how well-trafficked the website is.¹²⁷ One potential indicator of relative reach is CRI Persian's Facebook page, which, as of February 2022, has almost nine hundred and forty-five thousand likes.¹²⁸ This reach is a fraction of that of BBC Persian, which has more than 5 million likes,¹²⁹ and VOA Persian, with about 2.7 million likes.¹³⁰ Despite their comparatively more limited reach, the Persian-language versions of CRI and China.com have in the past served as main avenues through which China spreads its messages in Iran.¹³¹

However, as with the broader Middle East, Chinese efforts in both broadcast and social media spaces in Iran saw a significant increase during the COVID-19 pandemic, where Chinese messages in Persian emphasize China's vaccine contributions to the world and to Iran in particular, as the case study below illustrates.

Case study: A moment of truth for China's vaccine diplomacy in Iran¹³²

In recent years, bilateral relations between Iran and China have morphed into a strategic partnership, culminating in a much-hyped twenty-five-year deal that reportedly brings the two states closer on trade, economic, and military affairs.¹³³ These developments have had a polarizing effect in Iran. Hardliners, with blessings from the supreme leader, support the "pivot to the East" policy. They consider siding with China not only an opportunity for economic growth but also a blow to the United States in great-power competition. The deal has also sparked public outcry for more transparency about its details, but no such details have been released to date. To address this trust gap among Iranians, COVID-19-related narratives sought to position China as a

reliable partner in critical circumstances.

The main points were propagated by Chinese state-controlled media, diplomats, and other government affiliates, particularly on Twitter, then amplified by Iranian diplomats, public officials, and conservative media (or vice versa). The Persian services of CRI and China.com have been some of the main avenues for the spread of narratives favorable to both China and Iran. While these services have been active in Iran for years, the pandemic extended an opportunity to highlight China's technological advances and economic resilience in the face of unprecedented circumstances.¹³⁴

Narratives emanating from Chinese sources quickly found their way to state-affiliated media in Iran, such as Tasnim News Agency, a notionally independent outlet that has been linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which published stories minimizing the pandemic's impact on China's economy.¹³⁵ Other state-controlled outlets, such as Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), published reports about the promising outlook of cooperation between Iran and China after the pandemic.¹³⁶ Chinese officials and state media, including the *People's Daily*, also promoted the Fort Detrick conspiracy theory in Iran; similar theories had previously been endorsed by Iranian officials who openly speculated that COVID-19 was a biological attack against Iran and China.¹³⁷

As the coronavirus spread across Iran, the Persian services of Chinese media provided extensive coverage of China's donations, including stories on the Red Cross Society of China dispatching testing equipment and medical gear to Iran.¹³⁸ However, these public diplomacy efforts soon became a medium for influencing Iranian politics and, to an extent, undermining the administration of the now-former president Hassan Rouhani.

Iran acquired more than 10 million doses of Chinese Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines and started a mass vaccination campaign in May 2021. While public skepticism about the quality and efficacy of Chinese vaccines remained rampant, Iranian officials continued to express

127 "China.com فارسی" ("Persian China.com"), persian.china.com, January 5, 2022, archived at <http://web.archive.org/web/20220105104138/https://persian.china.com/>.

128 CRI Persian- چین امروز, Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/persian.cri.cn/>.

129 BBC News فارسی, Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/bbcpersian/>.

130 VOA Persian, Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/voapersian/>.

131 "رئیس اتاق بازرگانی ایران و چین مردم و دولت چین یک الگوی جدید برای پیشگیری از بیماری‌های همهگیر را به جهان ارائه دادند" ("Chairman of Iran-China Chamber of Commerce: Chinese people and government present a new model for preventing epidemics in the world"), persian.china.com, February 9, 2020, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20210420190512/https://persian.china.com/news/target/3341/20200209/1645114.html>.

132 The full report that forms the basis of this case study can be found here: Kargar, "A moment of truth," <https://medium.com/dfrlab/a-moment-of-truth-for-chinas-vaccine-diplomacy-in-iran-3ada4e6ffde>.

133 Lucille Greer and Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, *Last Among Equals: The China-Iran Partnership in a Regional Context*, Wilson Center, September 30, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/last-among-equals-china-iran-partnership-regional-context>.

134 "رئیس اتاق بازرگانی ایران و" persian.china.com.

135 "تسنیم و فارس با افتخار آرم سپاه را نصب کنند" ("Tasnim and Fars should proudly install the IRGC logo"), IRNA, August 1, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/5ank4pst>; and "زبان‌های کرونا به" ("Corona losses to China's large economy are not significant"), Tasnim News Agency, February 11, 2017, tinyurl.com/yumtwxy7.

136 "بعد از کرونا شاهد توسعه بیش از پیش همکاری‌های چین و ایران خواهیم بود" ("After Corona, we will see the further development of Sino-Iranian cooperation"), IRNA, April 18, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/3ca7t9un>.

137 "ادعای یک نماینده مجلس کرونا حمله بیوتروریستی علیه ایران و چین است" ("A member of parliament claims: Corona is a bioterrorist attack against Iran and China"), IranWire, March 6, 2020, <https://iranwire.com/fa/election-1398/37019>.

138 "فارسی" ("Persian"), persian.china.com, accessed April 20, 2021, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20210420204829/https://persian.china.com/news/domestic/3337/20200308/1651626.html>.

gratitude toward China for delivering on its promises.¹³⁹ They also blamed the United States and its sanctions regime, among other factors, for delaying the vaccination process in Iran.¹⁴⁰

The victory of conservative Ebrahim Raisi—and his anti-US rhetoric—in Iran's June 2021 presidential elections saw the rise of a campaign criticizing US sanctions on the country in the midst of a pandemic (though Iran was able to access and import Western vaccines through the

WHO's COVAX program¹⁴¹). Once the dust from the elections settled, state-affiliated accounts began to promote *#TheCrimeOfSanctions* (جنایت_تحریم), in tandem with such keywords as “vaccine.” The campaign meant to underscore the “vicious” US policies that affected the lives of ordinary Iranians, particularly during a pandemic.¹⁴²



Screenshot of a July 2, 2021, tweet by Reza Zabib (@r_zabib), at the time Iran's assistant minister of foreign affairs, announcing the acceleration of vaccine imports while blaming US sanctions for prolonged delays.¹⁴³

139 “واکسن سینوفارم چین دو نوع درجه یک تولید شده در یکن و درجه دو تولید شده در ووهان است و ایران واکسن ارزانتتر و درجه دو را وارد کرده است” Factyar, September 3, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2p8h2myn>; and R.zabib (@r_zabib), “چشم به راه محموره های بیشتر واکسن هستیم. مردم ما,” <https://twitter.com/AmbChangHua/status/139938298050262215>, May 31, 2021, 9:18 a.m., <https://twitter.com/AmbChangHua/status/139938298050262215>.

140 R.zabib (@r_zabib), “جنایت_تحریم قطعاً موجب تاخیر در دریافت واکسن بوده است. اگر عوامل دیگر هم دخیل بوده باشند، منافاتی با این موضوع ندارد. چهار ماه تاخیر در صدور مجوز اوفک برای برداشت از منابع بانک,” https://twitter.com/r_zabib/status/1431327622269743105, August 27, 2021, 2:47 p.m., https://twitter.com/r_zabib/status/1431327622269743105.

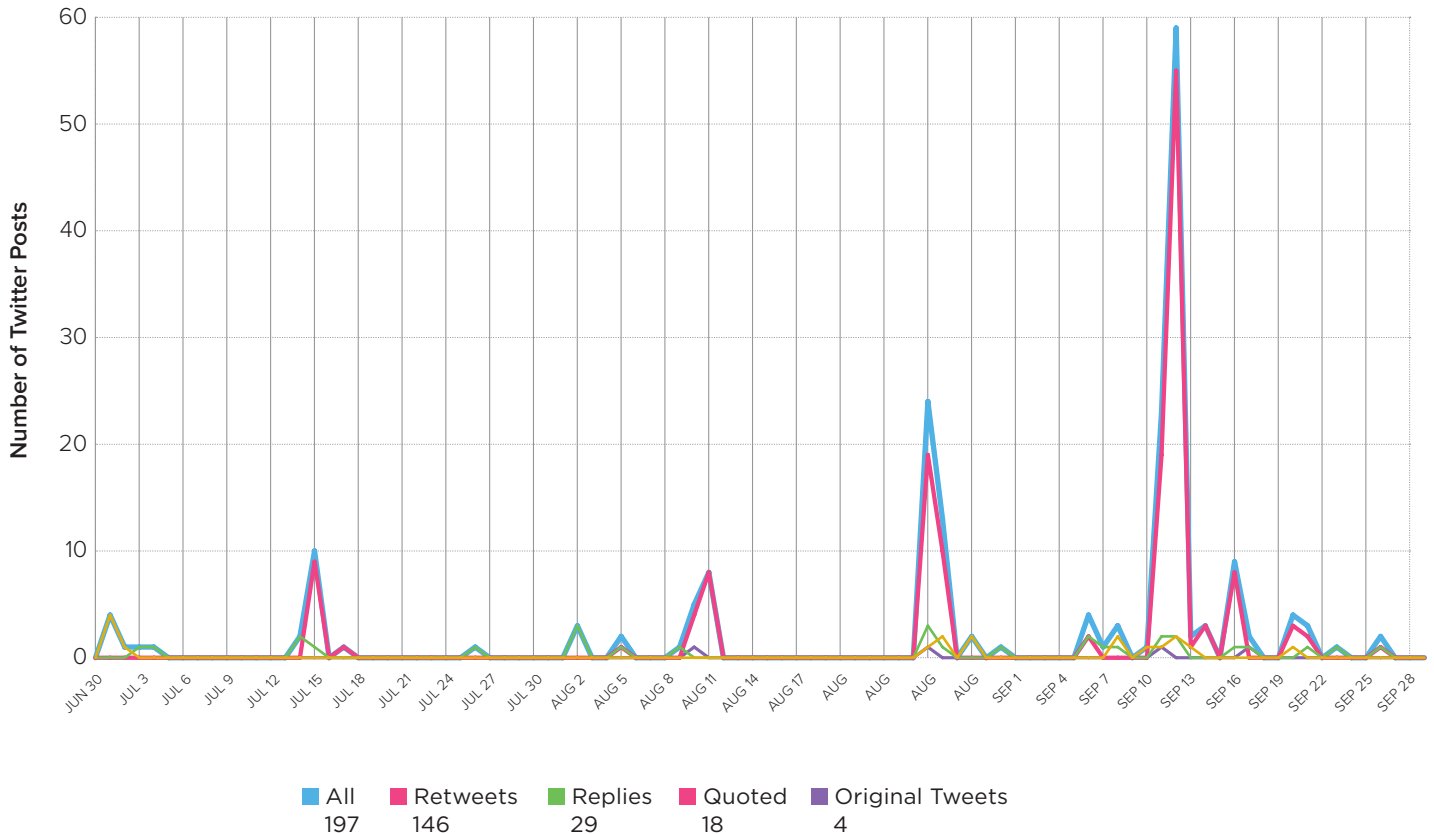
141 “COVAX,” World Health Organization, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/covax>, archived at <https://archive.ph/VUPbl>.

142 “Iran returns donated vaccines because they were made in US,” Associated Press, February 21, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/iran-returns-donated-vaccines-made-us-83030481>.

143 R.zabib (@r_zabib), “در کنار تولید پرافتخار داخلی تا اعلام کفایت وزارت بهداشت، واردات بیشتر/سریعتر در دست پیگیری است. تلاش همکاران در وزارتخارج و سفارتخانه ها که باسکوت کار کردند، و بهداشت و ب. مرکزی ستودنی بود. میتوان انتظار بهتر داشت اما موانع، بویژه #جنایت_تحریم را باید در ارزیابی لحاظ کرد,” https://web.archive.org/web/20210702183933/https://twitter.com/r_zabib/status/1411031739150000135, July 2, 2021, 2:39 p.m., archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20210702183933/https://twitter.com/r_zabib/status/1411031739150000135.

Between July 1 (shortly after Raisi won the election) and September 30, 2021 (a few weeks after Raisi's inauguration), 134 Twitter accounts promoted the hashtag #جنایت_تحریم a total of 197 times. Despite its limited scope, the campaign spoke to a deep-running tension in Iranian politics between the reformists and hardliners. Iranian diplomats, in particular Reza Zabib (@r_zabib), then

assistant minister of foreign affairs, underscored US sanctions as a key factor in delaying the mass vaccination process.¹⁴⁴ Some self-proclaimed nationalists went a step further to also blame the previous, moderate Rouhani administration for putting too much trust in the United States.¹⁴⁵



Line graph showing the number of posts using #TheCrimeOfSanctions and "vaccine" per day between July 1 and September 30, 2021. The peak in September happened when a self-proclaimed nationalist (@aqolizadeh) interpreted the June 2021 general license authorization from the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) as a US favor to Iran while the country struggled to vaccinate the public under a flawed moderate Rouhani administration.¹⁴⁶

144 Ibid.

145 Ali Gholizadeh (@aqolizadeh), "خزانهداری آمریکا تا ۲۷ خرداد ۱۴۰۰، یکسالونیم بعد از پاندمی، از صدور مجوز معافیت از #تحریم برای واردات دارو، تجهیزات و #واکسن کرونا به ایران خودداری کرده. آمریکا با، "Twitter, September 12, 2021, 6:03 p.m., <https://twitter.com/aqolizadeh/status/1437175134662574080>.

146 DFRLab via Meltwater.

CONCLUSION

China sees the Global South as an important vector for enhancing its discourse power and has deployed a number of strategies to shore up its influence there. The DFRLab has found compelling evidence that China is increasing its discourse power operations in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East; China is seeking to both “use international friends for international propaganda” and “borrow boats out to sea” as pillars of its strategy. The case studies in each regional chapter show that these efforts have had clear impacts in terms of both eroding democratic institutions (as in South Africa) and bolstering authoritarianism (as in Venezuela and Iran). These findings signal potential trouble for democratic resilience in the Global South.

The country case studies reveal evidence of a symbiotic relationship between Beijing’s efforts to enhance its discourse power and local governments’ efforts to weaken the checks and balances that civil society imposes. In some cases, like in South Africa, these impacts include threats to fundamental institutions of democracy, as China’s investment in private media means CCP-approved narratives increasingly compete for views with those of the independent press. In others, Chinese efforts serve to further entrench autocracy; for example, in Venezuela, the Chinese technology-enabled *carnet de la patria* system pays individuals with Twitter accounts to undertake inauthentic messaging promotion in support of the Maduro regime. In Iran, China’s promotion of its COVID-19 propaganda campaigns illustrates the degree to which Chinese influence can affect local dynamics and help bolster hardline voices in domestic politics.

The impacts of China’s efforts are not just limited to each region. The findings of this report show a number of trends regarding the country’s discourse power strategy in the Global South more broadly. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, there is clear evidence that China aims to foster buy-in among leaders in emerging economies for Chinese-defined international norms and to support Chinese efforts to have them become the global standard. To achieve these goals, China leverages its diplomatic connections in regional bodies, such as the FOCAC in Africa, the China-CELAC

Forum in Latin America, and the CASCF in the Middle East, and uses the economic weight of the BRI to intensify the impact of its messaging.

For example, one concept central to China’s discourse power strategy is its vision to build a “community with a shared future”—language that Chinese officials and diplomats often use in BRI-connected engagements and forums with foreign counterparts meant to signify China’s multilateral approach to international relations as an alternative to the “unilateral” approach taken by the United States. Similar tactics can be seen in China’s promotion of its concepts of “human rights,” “non-interference,” and “state sovereignty,” as mentioned throughout this report.

However, while most researchers agree that China’s global influence has grown, this has not necessarily translated into winning the hearts and minds across the Global South. For example, the most recent Afrobarometer survey finds evidence that the appeal of the “China model” in Africa has met with mixed success. Across the eighteen countries surveyed in 2019–20, the study found that 32 percent of Africans preferred the US model for development, compared to 23 percent who chose the Chinese model.¹⁴⁷ Afrobarometer Chief Executive Officer Joseph Asunka highlighted that influence on the African continent need not be a zero-sum endeavor—and that foreign policy should not only consider competition with China but should also reflect the interests and perspectives of Africans.¹⁴⁸

Similarly, China has seen mixed success in Latin America. According to poll data from the LAPOP AmericasBarometer project, of the eighteen countries surveyed in Latin America and the Caribbean, trust in the Chinese government has decreased 20 percent over nine years, from 58 percent in 2012 to 38 percent in 2021, with a precipitous decline beginning in 2016. In comparison, trust in the US government was at 57 percent in 2021, compared to 65 percent in 2012 and up from a low of 39 percent in 2018.¹⁴⁹ According to the survey’s findings, the country surveyed with the highest level of trust in the Chinese government was the Dominican Republic (71.6 percent), while Panama (31.6 percent) held the lowest level of trust in the region, despite switching

147 Edem Selormey, “Africans’ perceptions about China: A sneak peek from 18 countries,” Afrobarometer, September 3, 2020, <https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/africa-china-relations-3sept20.pdf>; and Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey, “Africans regard China’s influence as significant and positive, but slipping,” Afrobarometer, Dispatch No. 407, November 17, 2020, https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Dispatches/ad407-chinas_perceived_influence_in_africa_decreases-afrobarometer_dispatch-14nov20.pdf.

148 Thomas P. Sheehy and Joseph Asunka, “Countering China on the Continent: A Look at African Views,” United States Institute of Peace, June 23, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/06/countering-china-continent-look-african-views>.

149 Noam Lupu, Mariana Rodríguez, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, eds., *Pulse of Democracy*, LAPOP, 2021, 92, https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2021/2021_LAPOP_AmericasBarometer_Pulse_of_Democracy.pdf.

recognition away from Taiwan in 2017.¹⁵⁰ In the Middle East, scholars have similarly argued that despite the appeal of China's state-centric, authoritarian model, the Chinese model's transferability to the Middle East may be overblown due to low state capacity in many of the region's countries to consolidate the necessary level of control to pursue such a development path.¹⁵¹ At the same time, however, states in the Middle East aspire to emulate China's successful mix of economic dynamism and political authoritarianism.¹⁵²

It is telling that in global polls measuring views of China, states in the Global South hold the most favorable opinions. The Pew Research Center's 2019 Global Attitudes Survey found that majorities or pluralities in almost all the Middle Eastern, Latin American, and Sub-Saharan African countries surveyed have a favorable view of China, including 70 percent who have a favorable opinion in Nigeria and 68 percent in Lebanon. This is in contrast to Western countries, where the vast majority hold negative views.¹⁵³ Regardless of where China falls in public opinion polling, the findings in this report

demonstrate that Beijing can still leverage its deepening presence to achieve its discourse power goals on the world stage, undermining democratic institutions and universal values in the process.

The findings in this report also serve as a starting framework from which to understand Chinese discourse power in the Global South: its aspirations, activities, and impacts on the ground. These initial findings warrant further research, including additional case studies on Chinese discourse power operations within specific countries, as well as deeper understanding of the economic, political, security, and technological dimensions of Chinese discourse power operations in these regions. They also call for a coordinated, allied response to address the urgent issue of protecting media freedom in the digital age. To adequately meet this challenge requires empowering civil society actors and independent media in regions of the Global South, who are on the front lines of Chinese discourse power operations and best positioned to mitigate their impact.

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