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Hearing on
"Confronting Threats Posed by the
Chinese Communist Party to the U.S. Homeland"

A Testimony By

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Chairman Pfluger, Ranking Member Magaziner, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence. My remarks today will focus on two areas: (1) the broader strategic context through which China's overseas intelligence collection and information campaigns should be viewed; and (2) what the currently available evidence can tell us about the scope and effectiveness of these campaigns.

My testimony today is given as a scholar of Chinese foreign policy and U.S.-China relations. I emphasize this for two reasons. First, my role in academia is one of a researcher, rather than an administrator. My testimony is not on behalf of or directly or indirectly associated with my employer. Second, as former intelligence officer in the U.S. military, I am well aware that some of the most detailed reporting on a topic as sensitive as homeland security remains classified. As such, the testimony I am best positioned to offer pertains to the scholarly conclusions that can be drawn based on publicly available research.

To summarize, my assessment regarding China's threat to the U.S. homeland is threefold. First, it is clear that China is interested in using its capabilities to gather information and promote narratives that are consistent with its interests. Second, publicly available research provides inconclusive evidence regarding the effectiveness of China's operations, particularly those aimed at shaping global public opinion. Third, the U.S. government should consider devoting more resources toward research that can more precisely and conclusively assess the level of threat posed by China's activities in the United States. The absence of authoritative and publicly available evidence does not necessarily confirm the ineffectiveness of China's actions, but leaves observers without a clear picture of how to rank the severity of these threats in comparison to other aspects of American foreign policy toward China, such as the emerging bilateral security competition and the possibility of future military conflict.

The Context of U.S.-China Strategic Competition

The competition between the United States and China represents one of the defining international challenges of this century. In my view, the central problem of the U.S.-China relationship continues to be how to manage the two issues that most divide Washington and Beijing.

The first is that the United States and China have potentially irreconcilable differences over Taiwan. These differences have been effectively managed for decades, but both sides are increasingly apprehensive about the ability to maintain the status quo. There is healthy debate among scholars as to what is driving recent apprehensions. Some emphasize changes to the balance of power.[1] Others emphasize the difficulties of credible assurance, which might cause Beijing to feel it has no choice but to take military action.[2]

These dynamics are primed to put the United States in a difficult position. If the United States hopes to deter future military action against Taiwan, it will need to do one of the following: (1) match Chinese capabilities in the region to keep the costs of conflict prohibitively high; (2) reassure Beijing that the United States and Taiwan will not change the status quo, assuming that such concerns are central to Beijing's decision-making; or (3) some combination of the two. If the United States does not manage this aspect of the bilateral relationship effectively, deterrence may fail. The consequences of such a conflict would be devastating, not only in terms of the human and economic costs imparted on both sides, but also in terms of the reputational toll to the credibility of American strategic judgement if it fails to win. The stakes of successfully navigating this issue could not be higher.

The second issue is that the United States and China eye each other's domestic institutions with suspicion. Chinese decision-makers think about national security as the security of the regime.[3] From the perspective of Beijing's leaders, one of the most formative events in the country's history was the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, followed by the Soviet Union, which demonstrated the possibility of a similar fate for the Chinese Communist Party.[4] Beijing views some, although not all, of the global rules and norms that emerged after the Cold War as threats to the regime's stability, particularly those regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of democratic institutions.[5]

Thus, while it is important to seriously evaluate the threats that China poses to the homeland, these inquiries should not distract attention from the issues that are likely to be central in the global competition – and will greatly shape whether the two sides end up in what could be the most costly and dangerous conflict between two major powers since 1945.

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[1] Heginbotham, Eric, et al. *The US-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017*. Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2015; Kastner, Scott L. "Is the Taiwan Strait Still a Flash Point? Rethinking the prospects for armed conflict between China and Taiwan." *International Security* 40.3 (2015): 54-92.

[2] Blanchette, Jude and Ryan Hass. "The Taiwan Long Game: Why the Best Solution Is No Solution." *Foreign Affairs*. 102.1 (2023): 102-114; Weiss, Jessica Chen. "The U.S. Should Deter – Not Provoke – Beijing over Taiwan." *The Washington Post*. February 20, 2023.

[3] Weiss, Jessica Chen. "A World Safe for Autocracy?" *Foreign Affairs* 98.4 (2019): 92-108; Greitens, Sheena Chestnut. "Internal Security & Grand Strategy: China's Approach to National Security Under Xi Jinping." *Statement before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Hearing on US-China Relations at the Chinese Communist Party's Centennial* (2021).

[4] Sarotte, Mary Elise. "China's Fear of Contagion: Tiananmen Square and the Power of the European Example." *International Security* 37.2 (2012): 156-182; Gewirtz, Julian. *Never Turn Back: China and the Forbidden History of the 1980s*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022.

[5] Johnston, Alastair Iain. "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations." *International Security* 44.2 (2019): 9-60.

CCP Activities Abroad

It is helpful to view China's activities toward the U.S. homeland in this context. Like many countries, China seeks to gain advantages over states with whom it has differences in order to improve its bargaining power. The more intelligence that China is able to collect regarding foreign military capabilities, for instance, the more they might be able to emulate those capabilities within their own military portfolio, with an eye toward bargaining hard for the two priority issues discussed above.

China's overseas activities that emerge from this strategic context can be loosely divided into two categories. The first focuses on intelligence collection. The second focuses on information distribution. It is important to distinguish these two areas, because each is quite different in terms of the nature, scope, and potential to impart costs on the United States.

Intelligence Collection

In terms of intelligence collection, it is well-documented that China is gathering data in order to improve its military capacity, provide insight into U.S. decision-making processes, and potentially gain a tactical advantage over the United States in the event of a future conflict. The recent incident in which a Chinese high-altitude balloon traversed American airspace illustrates in vivid fashion that China is willing to assume risks in order to gather data against U.S. targets.

The fact that this event occurred shortly before Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's planned diplomatic visit to China is noteworthy. If recent reporting from the U.S. Department of Defense stating that Xi Jinping was unaware of the timing of this particular mission is true, it suggests that Beijing may have delegated decision-making regarding tactical execution of these operations to bureaucratic stakeholders who had limited understanding of how the disclosure of such an intelligence mission could shape China's other strategic priorities.[6] Such a posture could imply that Beijing has a high level of risk tolerance in its intelligence collection.

There are equally concerning aspects the security of personal data. Investigations into Chinese intelligence have long noted Beijing's interest in collecting data on foreign citizens, demonstrated by the 2015 Office of Personnel Management data breach and the 2017 cyber espionage operation against Equifax.[7] These events, coupled with the technical realities of digital technologies, illustrate that government communications and the privacy of American citizens may both potentially be compromised through the use of foreign hardware and software.

It seems more than plausible that China's defense espionage campaign has contributed to its ability to develop more advanced military technologies, which could shape its ability to fight and win a war in the Asia-Pacific region.[8] There is less publicly available reporting to document whether these intelligence operations, which have been successful at the collection phase, have also been effective in advancing Beijing's broader diplomatic, economic, and security goals beyond defense production.

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[6] Eric Schmitt and Zach Montague. "Balloon Crisis Highlighted a Split in China's Leadership, Pentagon Official Says," *The New York Times*, February 17, 2023.

[7] David E. Sanger and Julie Hirschfeld Davis. "Hacking Linked to China Exposes Millions of U.S. Workers," *The New York Times*, June 4, 2015; Katie Benner. "U.S. Charges Chinese Military Officers in 2017 Equifax Hacking," *The New York Times*, May 7, 2020.

[8] Department of Defense. *Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 2022, 147, 153.

Simply collecting data, particularly in large quantities, is insufficient to help decision-makers achieve their goals.[9] I am unaware of any publicly available study that has been able to document such a connection in the recent past. Recognizing this gap in our understanding is important, not only because it should drive the United States' own intelligence collection priorities, but also because we should recognize the challenges Beijing will face in effectively managing such large amounts of data.

Shaping Global Public Opinion

In parallel to intelligence collection, China engages in operations to disseminate information to foreign audiences. To date, the bulk of these activities are aimed at shaping global public opinion.[10] In simplest terms, China presents foreign citizens with information with the hope that it will shape the target's attitudes and, possibly, behavior. Perhaps the most concerning facet of these activities occurred last fall, when Meta and Google each reported that China-based groups had disseminated political content prior to the 2022 midterm elections.[11]

The idea of information control and propaganda is deeply embedded in the Chinese Communist Party's institutions – and it is easy to see how this would naturally spill over into efforts to shape public opinion abroad.[12] They also tie into the second core issue motivating the bilateral competition: China's concern about regime survival and the threat that a lack of international status might have on the Party's continued ability to rule. Furthermore, it is plausible that China genuinely believes that the rest of the world misunderstands it – and that these misunderstandings can be rectified through methods similar to those it employs at home.

These efforts to shape foreign public opinion through party propaganda are real and their scope broad. It is estimated that China spends approximately $8 billion on public diplomacy efforts alone.[13] To date, however, there is limited publicly available research documenting whether China's operations to shape foreign attitudes have been effective. For example, China Global Television Network (CGTN), a broadcasting company affiliated with the Chinese state, is actively disseminating China's public messaging worldwide.[14] But there are few studies that apply validated research methods for estimating the causal effect of exposure to such messages on public opinion.

The available evidence suggests several reasons why these operations might actually prove to be less effective than we might fear. Broadly, efforts to shape foreign public opinion do not always work out the way that states hope. Some research suggests, for example, that salient components of China's public diplomacy initiatives do not improve foreign attitudes toward China.[15] Scholars at Yale

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[9] Wohlstetter, Roberta. *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962.
[10] Diamond, Larry, and Orville Schell, eds. *Chinese Influence and American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2018; Brazys, Samuel, and Alexander Dukalskis. "China's Message Machine." *Journal of Democracy* 31.4 (2020): 59-73.
[11] Kurlantzick, Joshua. "China's Growing Attempts to Influence U.S. Politics." *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 31, 2022.
[12] King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism But Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107.2 (2013): 326-343; Roberts, Margaret E. *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.
[13] Martin, Peter. *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021, 213.
[14] Diamond and Schell 2018, 103.
[15] Green-Riley, Naima. *How States Win Friends and Influence People Overseas: The Micro-Foundations of U.S. and Chinese Public Diplomacy* (PhD Thesis). Harvard Department of Government.

University have found that Twitter messaging by Chinese diplomats were only able to positively shape perceptions of China when the message was framed in positive terms. When Chinese diplomats instead resorted to nationalist messages, often termed "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, Twitter messages instead had a negative effect on foreign public opinion.[16]

Some of the best available evidence on the domestic effects of China's propaganda also suggests that such messages do not necessarily operate as one might think. Several experimental studies have found that propaganda inside China can backfire, causing Chinese citizens to adopt less favorable views toward the government.[17] It is worth noting, however, that these studies have also found that Chinese propaganda is effective in signaling the strength of the state. That is, propaganda does not always change political attitudes, but it does remind citizens of the CCP's ability to coerce. Other studies suggest that Chinese domestic propaganda can be effective when it is able to emotionally resonate with its citizens, such as through nationalistic narratives recounting past wars in a positive light.[18] However, it is not yet clear that these same methods can be effectively applied in foreign countries.

One possible reason that Chinese propaganda could fail to sway global public opinion as intended is that foreign audiences may ascribe malign intentions to foreign governments, especially China. Research suggests that the ability to sway political attitudes depends in part on whether a target audience believes that what social scientists term the "cue-giver" (in this case China) has the audience's best interests at heart.[19] To illustrate this point in more familiar terms, consider how an American voter may be more likely to update their political attitudes when they receive a message from a co-partisan than when they receive one from a member of another party. There is an intuitive logic behind this: people make general judgments about who they deem trustworthy (e.g., one who shares the same basic political values) and then prioritize messages from these sources as they wade through the vast amounts of information to which they are exposed in daily life.[20]

Applying this intuition to China's public messaging campaigns would suggest that American citizens may be predisposed to severely discount or even completely discard messages received from Chinese propaganda outlets, provided that their baseline trust of such sources is low and they are able to accurately identify the creator of the content. Some studies of public diplomacy in other country contexts, usually focusing on the ability of American officials to shape global public opinion, are congruent with this conclusion.[21] Other experimental studies find a similar effect with regard to American perceptions of foreign public diplomacy as well.[22]

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[16] Mattingly, Daniel C., and James Sundquist. "When Does Public Diplomacy Work? Evidence from China's 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomats." *Political Science Research and Methods* (2022).
[17] Huang, Haifeng. "Propaganda as Signaling." *Comparative Politics* 47.4 (2015); Huang, Haifeng. "The Pathology of Hard Propaganda." *The Journal of Politics* 80.3 (2018): 1034-1038.
[18] Mattingly, Daniel C., and Elaine Yao. "How Soft Propaganda Persuades." *Comparative Political Studies* 55.9 (2022): 1569-1594.
[19] Lupia, Arthur, Mathew D. McCubbins, and Lupia Arthur. *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
[20] Druckman, James N. "On the Limits of Framing Effects: Who Can Frame?" *The Journal of Politics* 63.4 (2001): 1041-1066.
[21] Goldsmith, Benjamin E., and Yusaku Horiuchi. "Spinning the Globe? US Public Diplomacy and Foreign Public Opinion." *The Journal of Politics* 71.3 (2009): 863-875.
[22] Rhee, Kasey, Charles Crabtree, and Yusaku Horiuchi. "Perceived Motives of Public Diplomacy Influence Foreign Public Opinion." *Political Behavior* (2023).

In addition, trends in global public opinion should provide some comfort. If one judges the effectiveness of China's public diplomacy campaign based solely on China's approval rating in foreign countries, the effort has been a catastrophic failure. This is true not only in the United States, but in Japan, Australia, South Korea, and much of Europe as well. Across these countries, China is less well-trusted today that it was ten years ago. China may be attempting to win hearts and minds globally, but they have not succeeded in many contexts.[23]

If China's public diplomacy campaign has backfired (i.e., the effect of the program has been in the opposite direction than Beijing intended), it would be unsurprising not only for the reasons cited above, but also because China has often miscalculated in its foreign policy decision-making. For example, one scholar at the University of Southern California has shown that China's attempts to use economic statecraft to advance its relationships with other countries are often ineffective, particularly when the target state is a democracy.[24] Several of China's international security crises, ranging from the 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict to the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, failed to achieve many of the strategic objectives toward which Beijing's use of force was aimed.[25] In short, Beijing's ability to get what it wants in world politics is far from unchecked.

Three points of caution are merited with regard to these data. First, the aggregate relationship between a more active public diplomacy campaign and less favorable public opinion toward China is confounded by other events, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. This implies that China could be able to shape public opinion abroad more effectively as the pandemic ends. Second, while the decline in public opinion toward China is well-documented in developed countries, these polls often do not include countries from the Global South, which may be a priority for Chinese decision-makers. Third, none of the research discussed above addresses the possibility that China could use fake online profiles to hide the source of China's messaging from foreign audiences.

Policy Recommendations

By emphasizing gaps in public knowledge, I am not suggesting that we can dismiss the potential threats that China poses to the U.S. homeland. The fact that China has demonstrated its intent to engage in both intelligence collection and efforts to shape foreign public opinion, coupled with the competitive nature of the bilateral relationship, is sufficient cause for serious attention. Rather, my hope is that emphasizing what we do and do not yet know can illuminate recommendations for policy.

1. *Fund Social Science Research on the Topic*. The U.S. government should devote resources toward publicly accessible research that fills gaps in our knowledge regarding China's activities abroad. The social sciences are in the early stages of understanding whether and how new types of social media, sometimes employed by foreign actors, can shape public opinion. It is worth emphasizing again that existing research is insufficient to determine how costly these new technologies will be to the U.S. homeland. Yet, U.S. policymakers should be open to the possibility that better research on the topic would, for example, lead to the conclusion that

[23] Silver, Laura, Christine Huang and Laura Clancy. "How Global Public Opinion of China Has Shifted in the Xi Era." *Pew Research Center*, September 28, 2022.
[24] Wong, Audrye. "How Not to Win Allies and Influence Geopolitics: China's Self-Defeating Economic Statecraft," *Foreign Affairs*. 100.3 (2021), 44-53.
[25] Jost, Tyler. "Authoritarian Advisers: Institutional Origins of Miscalculation in China's International Security Crises," *International Security*, forthcoming.

China's capacity to shape American public opinion is low – and the broader conclusion that U.S efforts might be better directed toward other parts of the competitive relationship.

2. *Protect U.S. Researchers in China.* The U.S. government should work to ensure that American scholars who choose to conduct field research in China are protected.[26] Our ability to answer many of the most pressing questions regarding the future of the competition between the United States and China is increasingly limited by restrictions on American scholars by the Chinese government. The U.S. government should use diplomatic channels to reestablish opportunities for American researchers to study the Chinese political system while feeling protected from potential exploitation and detainment by Chinese authorities.

3. *Build Evidence-Based Public Awareness.* The U.S. government needs to explain the threats that China poses the privacy of their data to the American public. Specifically, it needs to provide more detailed explanations of the different risks that American citizens assume when they use foreign and domestic technologies. This may seem obvious to individuals who have served in government, but the social appeal of these technologies will raise the burden of proof for U.S. policymakers to convince American citizens.

[26] For an overview, see Greitens, Sheena Chestnut, and Rory Truex. "Repressive Experiences Among China Scholars: New Evidence from Survey Data." *The China Quarterly* 242 (2020): 349-375.