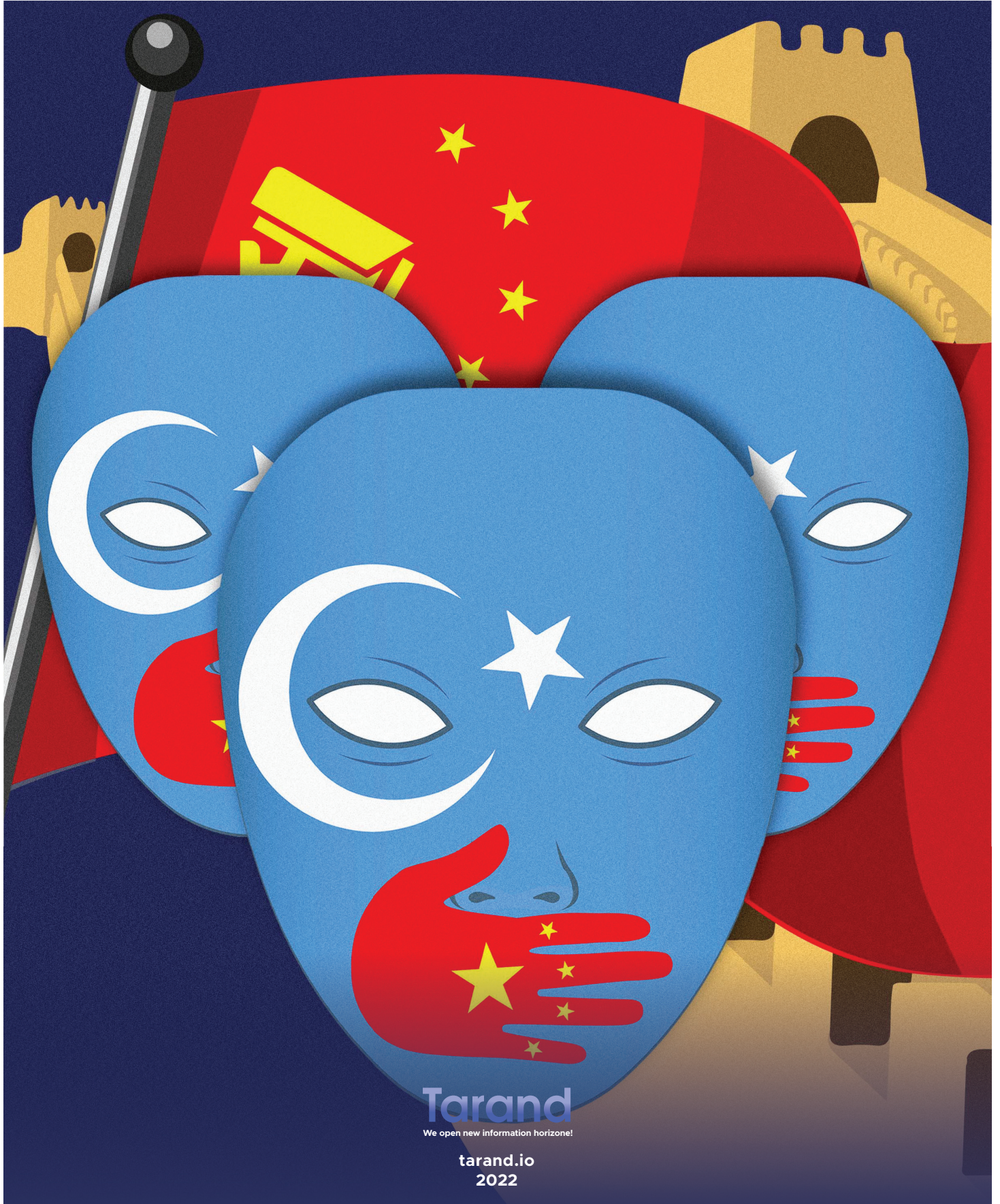


**“ Information counteraction of the Chinese government with the aim of suppressing and removing the Uyghur genocide issue from the international news agenda ”**



**Tarand**

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## SUMMARY

Although China has been involved in suppression of the Uyghur issue from the international news agenda for quite a while, it has gained a whole new momentum since former CCP secretary of Tibet Chen Quanguo was transferred to Xinjiang in 2016. For years, China has harshly attacked Western media for reports on situation in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, claiming that they should not intervene in China's internal affairs. This report will provide some outlines of the disinformation tactics of CCP.

In this report, Tarand expert group analyzes activity of the PRC in the global information field, which is primarily aimed at silencing the coverage of the "Uyghur question" in the world media, or confusing the public by deliberately sending it on the wrong track. The KGB methods, improved and adapted to the needs of China and modern informational reality, are clearly identifiable in China's activities.

This report also lifts the veil on China's capabilities in the field of information counteraction and information warfare. The report provides an indication of how the Chinese information machine would act in other problematic for China areas or in the event of a conflict.



Disinformation campaign by China has been marked by its wolf-warrior diplomacy, brazen statements by officials, and often by employment of foreign agents to form an outsider view on China. Especially in the case of Uyghurs, the victims are also forced to contribute to such efforts. Presently, the Chinese government still gets harsh criticism from international media and human rights organizations for various issues, including Hong Kong protests, Taiwan, COVID-19 pandemic and Belt & Road initiative, which the leadership of the Communist Party still tries to cope with.

### Wolf-warrior diplomacy, new kind of State Propaganda

Wolf-warrior diplomacy is a style of an aggressive diplomacy, pursued by Chinese foreign office. This diplomacy is not tolerant of any criticism and uses various methods, from whataboutism to blackmail, in order to counter any accusations. Perhaps the most well-known example of such a diplomat is MFA spokesman Zhao Lijian (赵立坚), who boasts over a million Twitter followers.<sup>1</sup> Another example is Hu Xijin (胡锡进), editor-in-chief of Global Times newspaper.

Wolf-warrior diplomacy utilizes Soviet-style state propaganda videos in order to counter the criticism. One of them was shared by Hu Xijin in March 2021 in response to accusations against China of using Uyghurs as forced labourers.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Zhao Lijian called accusations of genocide the "lie of the century".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> twitter.com - Zhao Lijian personal account (@zlj517)

<sup>2</sup> twitter.com - Hu Xijin's tweet ([https://twitter.com/HuXijin\\_GT/status/1374929355349008390](https://twitter.com/HuXijin_GT/status/1374929355349008390))

<sup>3</sup> twitter.com - Zhao Lijian's tweet (<https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1343579013701201927>)

This transition did not occur suddenly. When China's GDP overtook Japan's as the world's 2nd-largest, China became more confident and CCP's foreign policy became more assertive, since 2010 gradually departing from Deng Xiaoping's "keep a low profile and bide your time, while also getting something accomplished" dictum. This was sealed when Xi Jinping added 'confidence in culture' to existing 'three matters of confidence - socialist path, theory and system' in 2016, boosting and promoting nationalism.<sup>4</sup>

Wolf-warrior diplomacy brings along a "keyboard army", which is more or less similar to its Russian counterparts, posing as genuine patriotic users.<sup>5</sup> Aggressive trolling tactics are mostly aimed at silencing the opponents. ASPI International Cyber Policy Centre's report suggests China has increasingly been using social media websites like Facebook and Twitter, raising the amount of 'likes' of their posts and promoting "alternative reality" videos.<sup>6</sup>

Uyghurs living abroad and in China are also used in information wars, with blackmail methods employed for their recruitment. The NY Times and ProPublica's investigation of over 5000 videos posted in YouTube and Twitter found out that the Chinese government orchestrated alternative narratives to combat accusations.<sup>7</sup>

Videos featuring Uyghurs in Xinjiang were made with common instructions used for guidance, and attempts to make them appear authentic. Some of these videos also include relatives of Rebiya Kadeer, former president of the World Uyghur Congress. Her granddaughters 'warned' her of being fooled by 'bad men overseas'.

Kadeer was certain that they were blackmailed and forced to appear in the videos.

Uyghurs living abroad also had their fair share of blackmail. Some of them made videos praising China's treatment of Uyghurs, only to remove them after receiving massive criticism from the Uyghur diaspora.<sup>8</sup> The fear of losing contact with their relatives in Xinjiang made them a weapon in the hands of CCP propaganda. CCP also recruits 'loyal Uyghurs' in order to instill more confusion in the Western world and Uyghur diaspora alike.

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<sup>4</sup> keywords.china.org.cn - "四个自信" (Four Confidence)

<sup>5</sup> bbc.com - "The disinformation tactics used by China" Krassi Twigg & Kerry Allen 12.

03.2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/56364952>

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Wallis, Albert Zhang, and Zoe Meers, "Strange Bedfellows on Xinjiang: The CCP, Fringe Media and US Social Media Platforms," March 30, 2021, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/strange-bedfellows>.

<sup>7</sup> "Inside a Chinese Propaganda Campaign," June 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/06/22/technology/xinjiang-uyghurs-china-propaganda.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Mihray Abdilim and Erkin Tarim, "China's Use of Expat Uyghurs in CCP Centenary Propaganda Sparks Backlash," June 30, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/propaganda-backlash-06302021190015.html>.

Besides blackmailing and forced videos, CCP is also involved in paid partnerships.<sup>9</sup> One of such paid partnerships also includes paying Twitter to have their tweets promoted.<sup>10</sup> At the end of 2019, Changyu Culture landed a \$92,720 contract to shoot propaganda videos about the "beauty" of life in Xinjiang, producing Arabic, English, Turkish and Chinese versions, and disseminating them online. A company called Xinjiang Audiovisual Publishing turned out to be the commissioner of the video. One of its shareholders is the Xinjiang regional branch of the State Administration of Radio, Film and TV.<sup>11</sup> Uyghurs living abroad find such state propaganda harder to react to day-by-day.

Chinese state-funded channels such as CGTN also employed "aid" of foreign vloggers residing in China. These vloggers claimed to be 'former journalists', 'influencers' or simply bloggers, but repeatedly refused from any further contracts with interviewer journalists.<sup>12</sup> This goes hand-in-hand with Xi Jinping's new "digital sovereignty" concept. Following this concept, China's government requires bloggers to be approved by authorities if they want to write on a wide range of topics, such as education, health, economics, war and foreign affairs. Ma Xiaolin, professor in the School of Arabic Studies of Beijing Foreign Studies University, reported that he was discouraged by Weibo, a Chinese social-media website, from writing about politics, economics and military-related matters. "As an international affairs researcher and a columnist, it looks like I can only go the route of entertainment, food and beverage now," Xiaolin wrote on January 31.<sup>13</sup>

One of the most sophisticated ways of wolf-warrior diplomacy is mirror propaganda. For example, Li Xiaojun, publicity director at the Bureau of Human Rights Affairs of the State Council Information Office, which is the office of the Chinese cabinet's spokesman, denied mistreating Muslims in Xinjiang (which they call East Turkestan), and said China was trying to avoid the problems of radicalization Europe had experienced: "Look at Belgium, look at Paris, look at some other European countries," Li said, referring to recent terror attacks in these locations blamed on Islamic extremists. "You have failed."<sup>14</sup>

Another example of such mirror-treatment is China's answer to Turkish criticism. China's consul in Iraqi Kurdistan Ni Ruchi announced creation of Kurdish Language Faculty in one of the biggest universities of China.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "China Expands Disinformation Campaign to Undermine International Xinjiang Outcry," April 29, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/disinformation-04292021122736.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Ryan Gallagher, "TWITTER HELPED CHINESE GOVERNMENT PROMOTE DISINFORMATION ON REPRESSION OF UYGHURS," August 19, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/08/19/twitter-ads-china-uyghurs/>.

<sup>11</sup> "China Expands Disinformation Campaign to Undermine International Xinjiang Outcry."

<sup>12</sup> Kerry Allen and Sophie Williams, "The Foreigners in China's Disinformation Drive," November 7, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57780023>.

<sup>13</sup> Huizhong Wu and Fu Ting, "China Steps Up Online Controls With New Rule for Bloggers," February 17, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/china-steps-up-online-controls-with-new-rule-for-bloggers/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Blanchard and Tom Miles, "China Mounts Publicity Campaign to Counter Criticism on Xinjiang," February 10, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xinjiang-idUSKCN1MC0I6>.

<sup>15</sup> Şaho Emin, "Çin'den 'Kürtçe Açılımı,'" September 26, 2019, <https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/interview/26092019>.

Moreover, through media acquisitions in foreign countries and large-scale telecommunications ventures, China is increasing its share in critical information infrastructure overseas. Turkish newspapers have been receiving a lot of advertisements from the Chinese embassy with propaganda content concerning the Uyghur issue. Advertisements include various messages from congratulatory messages on the eve of religious holidays to full-blown articles paid for by Xinhua.<sup>16</sup>

Chinese disinformation campaign in Turkey is further bolstered by Patriotic Party (Vatan Partisi). Party's leader Perinçek is also close to Russia's nationalist anti-liberal politician Alexander Dugin. Perinçek is one of Turkey's leading advocates of leaving NATO and joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The Party frequently networks with the CCP Central Committee's International Liaison Department - a vital organ of the Chinese Communist Party's foreign affairs network, targeting political parties abroad.<sup>17</sup> Perinçek met with the deputy director Li Jun in Beijing on February 22, 2019 following the escalation of the Xinjiang issue in Sino-Turkish relations, which occurred in early February 2019. His positive appraisal of the CCP's ethno-social policies and denunciation of "separatism" was publicized and advertised both in the CCP's Chinese and the PP's media wings. Yön Radyo is also famous for airing the "Voice of Urumchi" program, full of Chinese state propaganda. Besides the party organs Aydınlık and Yön Radyo, other media outlets affiliated with or sympathetic to the PP and its position with regard to Xinjiang are the Ulusal Kanal and Oda TV stations. Sympathetic to China's Xinjiang policy coverage sometimes also appears in major Turkish media.<sup>18</sup>

Chinese disinformation and state propaganda campaigns are only expected to grow and become more sophisticated in the future, with the possible utilization of Artificial Intelligence. Recently, MFA spokesman Hua Chunying said: "They should not be surprised at all by China's countermeasures", answering to AFP journalist's question about wolf-warrior diplomacy.<sup>19</sup>

The National Institute for Defence Studies (Japan) has published a new report analysing Chinese disinformation campaigns and recent trends, which suggest that despite big success among the domestic audience base, the CCP struggles to drive its message home on the foreign front.<sup>20</sup> The think tank mentioned that China recognises the importance of information dominance in modern warfare, especially in cyberspace, where digital espionage is one of the areas of focus.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Onur Erkan, "Gazetelerin Yeni Favori Reklamvereni: Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti," May 6, 2021, <https://serbestiyet.com/haberler/ozel-haber-gazetelerin-yeni-favori-reklamvereni-cin-halk-cumhuriyeti-61693/>.

<sup>17</sup> Jichang Lulu and Martin Hála, "A New Comintern for the New Era: The CCP International Department from Bucharest to Reykjavík," August 16, 2018, <https://sinopsis.cz/en/a-new-comintern-for-the-new-era-the-ccp-international-department-from-bucharest-to-reykjavik/>.

<sup>18</sup> Ondřej Klimeš, "China's Xinjiang Propaganda and United Front Work in Turkey: Actors and Content," March 5, 2021, <https://sinopsis.cz/en/xinjiang-propaganda-united-front-turkey/>.

<sup>19</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on March 26, 2021," March 27, 2021, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1864659.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1864659.shtml).

<sup>20</sup> "NIDS China Security Report 2021 China's Military Strategy in the New Era," 2021, [http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/publication/chinareport/pdf/china\\_report\\_EN\\_web\\_2021\\_A01.pdf](http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/publication/chinareport/pdf/china_report_EN_web_2021_A01.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> "China's Military Aims to Use AI to Dominate in Cyber and Outer Space, Japanese Think Tank Warns," November 13, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3109803/chinas-military-aims-use-ai-dominate-cyber-and-outer-space>.

There is a huge possibility that AI will be employed in disinformation campaign by the Chinese government in connection with the denial of the Uyghur genocide. US National Counterintelligence and Security Center's acting director, Michael Orlando, said on October 21, 2021 that the US "can't afford to lose" ground to China in several key areas: AI, autonomous systems, quantum computing, semiconductors and biotechnology. "Although we've been saying this year after year people are not digesting this," he added.<sup>22</sup>

Based on the facts presented in this report, Tarand expert group came to the conclusion that the activity of the Chinese authorities, as well as organizations and individuals associated with them with regard to the "Uyghur issue" will increase, as will the budgets allocated for this activity. In a situation when the US State Department, the US media, individual American and European politicians and public figures, including show business personalities, pay more and more attention to the "Uyghur issue", Beijing will try to be proactive. It is also predicted that China's attempts to create a parallel reality and replicate this reality in the framework of wide information campaigns, using elements of psychological pressure, will intensify.

Experts do not exclude that at some point China may take aggressive and violent measures against Uyghur activists living in the West, and researchers and journalists covering this topic could also be targeted (with the possibility of cyber and information attacks).

The Chinese authorities will certainly use the Coronavirus Pandemic, as well as their humanitarian actions, to divert suspicions from China and relegate the "Uyghur issue" to the background.

In addition, the Tarand expert group came to the conclusion that based on objective reality, China's attempts to create and replicate a parallel reality will not gain an overwhelming success. However, targeted operations carried out by China may well win an information advantage for Beijing.

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<sup>22</sup> "US Intel Warns China Could Dominate AI, Gain Military Edge," October 22, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/10/22/us-intel-warns-china-could-dominate-advanced-technologies>.

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