

Russia and China are waging a propaganda war against the US — why are we silent?

Joseph Bosco (Opinion contributor) - The Hill

Biden administration officials, like most of their recent predecessors, defensively deny that U.S. policy is to contain, hold down, or wage a new Cold War against China.



Russia and China are waging a propaganda war against the US — why are we silent?© Provided by The Hill

By contrast, the Chinese Communist Party continues to pursue expansionist economic, political and military goals and challenge the West at every level, especially in the informational and ideological domains. Beijing — along with its strategic allies and partners Russia, Iran and North Korea — sees the West in decline and strives to hasten its fall, just as the Soviet Union and its acolytes attempted in the original Cold War.

In fact, Moscow continues to roll out and recycle some of the same disinformation and propaganda gambits it employed for the Soviet Union, such as its recent accusations of a U.S. biological warfare campaign in Ukraine.

Baseless as the claims are, they divert attention, at least for some, from the actual crimes against humanity being perpetrated by Russian forces in Ukraine as well as Vladimir Putin's criminal actions in Russia itself, where he crushes domestic opposition to the war and his regime, often murderously.

What is missing from the West's response to the open assault of Russia and China on the rules-based international order is a sustained information counter-offensive similar to the strategic communications campaign waged by the United States and the Free World against the Soviet Union.

In a series of major speeches, key national security and diplomatic officials in the Trump administration began the process of alerting the nation and the world, as former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo put it, to “what the China threat means for our economy, for our liberty, and indeed for the future of free democracies around the world.”

National security adviser Robert O’Brien led off the coordinated messaging in a [June 2020 speech](#) where he described the ideological roots of the China threat.

“The [Chinese Communist Party’s] stated goal is to [...] remake the world according to the CCP. The effort to control thought beyond the borders of China is well under way. Over the past decade, the Party has invested billions of dollars into overseas propaganda operations to great effect.”

While [Xi Jinping has been compared to Mao Zedong](#), O’Brien pointed to an earlier communist model. “Let us be clear, the Chinese Communist Party is a Marxist-Leninist organization. Party General Secretary Xi Jinping sees himself as Joseph Stalin’s successor.”

In his own speech a month later, [Pompeo warned](#): “We must admit a hard truth that should guide us in the years and decades to come, that if we want to have a free 21st century, and not the Chinese century of which Xi Jinping dreams, the old paradigm of blind engagement with China simply won’t get it done.”

Instead, [Pompeo invoked Richard Nixon’s message](#) prior to his presidential trip to Beijing: “The world cannot be safe until China changes. [...] Our goal should be to induce change.”

Pompeo said the ideological challenge is not an easy one, because it needs to begin with an updating of Americans’ own perceptions about China.

“We must start by changing how our people and our partners perceive the Chinese Communist Party. We have to tell the truth. We can’t treat this incarnation of China as a normal country, just like any other.”

National security scholars and former officials are increasingly concerned that the U.S. and Western response on the information level is not commensurate with China’s threat.

In a [Hilltop-ed](#) in February, [Evan Cooper and Robert A. Manning of the Atlantic Council](#) wrote: “The United States has an image problem. Foreign public have historically low approval of U.S. leadership. [...] The U.S. needs to [...] remedy its public diplomacy deficit, and re-engage globally both to better tell America’s story and expand people-to-people, art and cultural exchanges.”

They called for the revival of the organization once charged with those missions, the U.S. Information Agency, which was abolished in 1999.

Robert Gates, secretary of Defense in the Bush and Obama administrations, recently decried the inadequacy — the virtual nonexistence — of an effective U.S information strategy. “Russia and China are running rings around us,” he [wrote in The Washington Post](#).

Just as with its Soviet predecessor, “Russia [...] has relied heavily on propaganda and disinformation to spread false narratives among its own people and those outside its borders, as well as to undermine the West’s coherence and resolve.”

As for Russia’s “no-limits strategic partner,” Gates wrote, “Chinese TV and radio broadcasts, websites and publications are readily available in the United States, but there is no reciprocity in China.”

He attributed part of the problem to USIA’s demise and the failure to build a substitute bureaucratic structure, but he also saw a lack of vision from the top. “[T]here is no government-wide international communications and engagement strategy, and certainly no sense of urgency. In short, the country that invented public relations is being out-communicated around the world by an authoritarian Russia and increasingly totalitarian China.”

But, he wrote, “The solution is not to re-create the USIA — the world has moved on.” He called instead for fresh thinking on the challenge — “a global engagement plan for strategic communications to explicitly advance U.S. national security interests.”

Though in the past Gates has expressed little regard for the 40-year Biden record on foreign policy, this administration is well-positioned to take up the strategic communications challenge if it has the will to do so.

It started on the right foot by following the Trump team’s clear-eyed approach to the growing China threat and the need to strengthen the American commitment to Taiwan. It enhanced those policies by appealing to allies and partners to join in confronting the authoritarian challenges from China and Russia, by stressing human rights, and by establishing the Summit of Democracies.

But its monumental Afghanistan failure seriously tarnished U.S. credibility on a broad foreign policy front. And its erratic stalemate policy on Ukraine has raised doubts about the U.S. commitment to Taiwan despite Biden’s occasional ad hoc-remarks unmatched by formal administration statements.

Biden needs to state, officially and unequivocally, that the U.S. will do whatever is necessary to assure the democratic security of both Ukraine and Taiwan as front-line states in the existential struggle between democracy and authoritarianism.