

Assessing the impact of CCP information operations related to Xinjiang

Albert Zhang with Tilla Hoja



About the author

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank ASPI staff for their research assistance. Special thanks to Jacob Wallis, Danielle Cave, Daria Impiombato, Fergus Hanson, Michael Shoebridge, Justin Bassi and our peer reviewers for feedback and comments.

Funding for this report was provided by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

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First published July 2022.

ISSN 2209-9689 (online).

ISSN 2209-9670 (print).

Cover image: Illustration by yettesu, [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#).



Funding for this report was provided by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

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Policy Brief
Report No. 62/2022



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What's the problem?

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is using technology to enforce transnational digital repression and influence unwitting audiences beyond China's territory. This includes using increasingly sophisticated online tactics to deny, distract from and deter revelations or claims of human rights abuses, including the arbitrary detention, mass sterilisation and cultural degradation of minorities in Xinjiang. Instead of improving its treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities, the CCP is responding to critiques of its current actions against human rights by coordinating its state propaganda apparatus, security agencies and public relations industry to silence and shape Xinjiang narratives at home and abroad.

Central to the CCP's efforts is the exploitation of US-based social media and content platforms. CCP online public diplomacy is bolstered by covert and coercive campaigns that impose costs and seek to constrain international entities—be they states, corporations or individuals—from offering evidence-based critiques of the party-state's record on human rights in Xinjiang and Hong Kong and other sensitive issues. This asymmetric access to US-based social media platforms allows the CCP to continue testing online tactics, measuring responses and improving its influence and interference capabilities, in both overt and covert ways, across a spectrum of topics.

The impact of these operations isn't widely understood, and the international community has failed to adequately respond to the global challenges posed by the CCP's rapidly evolving propaganda and disinformation operations. This report seeks to increase awareness about this problem based on publicly available information.



What's the solution?

The exploitation of information operations and propaganda by Russia and China during Putin's war on Ukraine demonstrates the importance of taking measures to reduce the power and impact of such activities before a crisis or military conflict is underway.¹ This is a viable option, given both the success of the West in countering Russia's false pretexts for instigating an invasion of Ukraine by revealing Russian plans,² and the outstanding success of the Ukrainian Government's communication efforts globally. This has undercut attempts by Putin to establish legitimacy in the conflict and has also pressured Beijing into moderating its international and material support for Moscow during the conflict. However, collective action was largely taken only after Russia's invasion. The CCP has a different *modus operandi* and seeks to achieve its objectives without military force. It relies on other countries having high tolerance levels before those countries take action, which often means that the harmful impacts of information operations are occurring before any countermeasures are taken.

CCP information operations targeting Xinjiang narratives and human rights abuses should be countered now to mitigate the party's global campaign of transnational repression and information warfare. Achieving that requires governments and civil society to work more closely with social media platforms and broadcasters to deter and expose propaganda organisations and operatives.

Governments must lead this policymaking process in coordination with allies and partners with shared interests. Economic sanctions regimes that target the perpetrators of serious human rights violations and abuses should be expanded to include the distributors of disinformation and foreign propaganda who silence, intimidate and continue the abuse of survivors and victims of human rights violations. Sanctions targeting propagandists and state media have already been used as an effective tool of statecraft. For example, the Australian Government,³ in coordination with other governments in the US, UK and Europe,⁴ has sanctioned Russian propagandists and state media for spreading disinformation and propaganda during Putin's war. Sanctioning Chinese propagandists and state media for their repression of global free speech will curb the CCP's disinformation and foreign propaganda prior to a conflict, undermine its capabilities during conflicts and deter future information campaigns.

CCP information operations are also evolving and changing. Governments should disrupt Chinese propaganda assets and identify strategic data sources—such as public opinion mining of US-based social media—that are being exploited to improve the party's influence and interference capabilities. In addition, governments, civil society actors, think tanks and social media operators should create countermeasures and responses to CCP information operations and propaganda activities focusing on the discourse on human rights to blunt and deter malign CCP activity. This should include funding research exposing the Chinese foreign propaganda system, including public relations firms, cultural corporations and public opinion monitoring companies based inside and outside China.

Key takeaways

- Senior CCP leaders view information and disinformation as central to geopolitical competition and influencing international public opinion. China's President, Xi Jinping, has said that 'online public opinion work should be the top priority of propaganda and ideological work' and that the People's Republic of China (PRC) 'must grasp the initiative in this public opinion battlefield' against the West. Global leaders must recognise Xi's securitisation of the information space and respond to its implications.
- The Chinese Government is manipulating US-based social media to deny, distract from and deter revelations of its human rights abuses in Xinjiang by applying similar tools and techniques to propaganda and information management in mainland China, where it completely controls its domestic information space. The CCP supplements its diplomatic and externally facing state media messaging by expanding its disinformation assets, which comprise foreign and Chinese influencers, academics, financially motivated proxies with shared interests, and outsourced propaganda workers contracted to state-linked marketing companies.
- This report finds that CCP information operations are successfully silencing states, businesses and civil society organisations globally and deterring them from criticising the CCP's record and current actions on human rights. Most notable is the silence of governments in Muslim-majority and non-Western countries. Of the 57 member states forming the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, only Albania and, more recently, Turkey have condemned the CCP for its policies in Xinjiang.
- Disinformation and coercive public diplomacy have persuaded or coerced some audiences to publicly support the CCP's policies in Xinjiang. Governments that have supported or condemned CCP policies at UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) sessions are divided along continental and regional lines. Most countries that have supported CCP policies are in Africa or the Middle East, while countries that have condemned CCP policies are mostly European or democratic nations.
- Social media companies have taken different approaches to mitigating social media manipulation, resulting in CCP information operations being more effective on some platforms than on others. ASPI analysed 613,301 Facebook posts and 6,780,809 Twitter tweets and retweets mentioning 'Xinjiang' between 1 January 2020 and 1 January 2022. Of the top 400 Facebook posts with the most interactions (including reactions and shares), 60.3% were posted by Chinese state media and diplomats. Of the top 1,000 Twitter tweets with the most interactions (including likes and retweets), 5.5% were posted by Chinese state media and diplomats, and 4% were from accounts suspended by Twitter for platform manipulation.
- News articles in different languages have varied significantly in the tone of their reporting about Xinjiang and reflected differences in global public opinion about the CCP's policies in the region. ASPI analysed 494,710 articles, published in more than 65 languages, mentioning Xinjiang from the Global Database of Events, Language and Tone (GDELT) between 1 January 2021 and 1 January 2022. Most articles were published in Chinese (55%) or English (35%). Of the top 20 language sources, Chinese-language articles were more likely to convey positive assessments of Chinese state policy and action on Xinjiang. Statistically similar results came from analyses of articles published in Urdu (one of the official languages of Pakistan), Japanese, Thai and Turkish.
- As US-based platforms increasingly remove covert CCP-linked coordinated inauthentic networks, I judge that it's likely the CCP will bolster its externally facing propaganda by further co-opting overseas Chinese diaspora groups to influence perceptions of Xinjiang among senior political leaders abroad.



Introduction

In December 2021, the UK-based Uyghur Tribunal declared that Chinese President Xi Jinping and other top Chinese officials bore primary responsibility for genocide against Turkic Muslim populations in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, citing forced birth control and sterilisation measures, and finding evidence of crimes against humanity, including torture and sexual abuse.⁵ That finding added to a chorus of voices condemning the CCP's human rights abuses in the region from governments, parliaments and corporations to researchers, civil society organisations and religious leaders around the globe.⁶ The condemnation is based on compelling direct evidence of large-scale and individual abuses, supported by eyewitness accounts from people who have been abused and from former abusers, as well as detailed analysis of satellite imagery, Chinese Government documents and other material.

In this report, I analyse statements made by senior CCP officials about influencing global public opinion over their human rights record in Xinjiang and map the evolving ecosystem that supports the CCP's outward-facing propaganda and information operations on US-based social media platforms. I then assess the impact of those efforts beyond the analytics available from social media data, such as international support for CCP policies in Xinjiang by government representatives, shifts in terminology used in corporate statements, and language used in media reporting. I conclude by examining recent CCP political events mobilising overseas Chinese groups to influence Xinjiang narratives before providing key recommendations to ensure that diplomacy and counter-disinformation initiatives of like-minded states can be effectively calibrated.

For this report, ASPI analysed quantitative and qualitative datasets in English, Mandarin and other languages. This methodology included:

- conducting a literature review of Chinese academic and news reporting of CCP information operations and analysing other Chinese-language open-source data
- drawing on previous ASPI Xinjiang-related disinformation datasets
- collecting social media data from the API services (Twitter and CrowdTangle/Facebook)
- collecting and analysing new articles from multiple languages in GDELT's Knowledge Graph using Google BigQuery
- manually collecting corporate responses and government statements
- using the programming language R to quantitatively analyse data and applying statistical significance tests.

CCP information operations are defined as a set of online and offline activities that seek to influence international audiences by coercion or deception or by disseminating demonstrably false information.⁷ This includes the amplification of foreign propaganda and public diplomacy by inauthentic accounts, outright disinformation, and the public opinion research and psychological warfare activities of the People's Liberation Army.⁸

‘Tell Xinjiang stories well’

International public opinion is considered a domain of strategic competition in which the CCP aims to project ‘discourse power’, shape international media standards and create a favourable information environment for its geopolitical goals, just as it controls its domestic information environment for Chinese citizens.⁹ Under the framework of the ‘Total National Security Outlook’ (总体国家安全观), the CCP seeks to minimise existential threats to domestic party control by deploying security-focused institutions and technologies abroad.¹⁰ Global social media and digital platforms are central to those efforts. China’s President, Xi Jinping, has repeatedly emphasised that ‘online public opinion work should be the top priority of propaganda and ideological work’¹¹ and that the PRC ‘must grasp the initiative in this public opinion battlefield as soon as possible ... to create a clean and upright cyberspace for netizens.’¹²

Senior CCP leaders, including Xi Jinping, are likely to view revelations of its human rights record in Xinjiang as potentially damaging the party-state’s domestic stability, international standing and economic partnerships. Instead of changing the CCP’s policies in the region, senior party officials have instead sought to directly influence international narratives about their human rights violations. At the 43rd Biweekly Consultation Symposium in November 2020, the Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Wang Yang (汪洋),¹³ said that it was necessary to ‘continuously improve the effectiveness of telling China’s human rights stories well, and let China’s human rights stories spread, to go further and wider, and to enhance the international community’s recognition of [China’s] achievements in the development of human rights.’¹⁴ At the third Xinjiang Central Work Forum held in September 2020, Xi Jinping said that ‘it is necessary to tell the story of Xinjiang in a multi-level, all-round, and three-dimensional way, and confidently publicise the excellent social stability of Xinjiang and the happy life of the people living and working in peace and contentment.’¹⁵ That speech is frequently quoted in Chinese propaganda and academic literature and by employees in the Chinese foreign propaganda apparatus to whitewash witness testimonials, empirical and open-source evidence and analysis of Chinese Government documents of large-scale human rights abuses in Xinjiang.¹⁶

According to published discussions within Chinese academic and propaganda circles, the CCP claims that allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang are being used by the ‘West’ to maintain discourse hegemony over international public opinion. Academics at the Communication University of China, in discussion with representatives from China International Publishing Group,¹⁷ considered international public opinion about human rights issues related to Xinjiang as a ‘game of values between the global South and the East [referring to countries in Africa and Southeast, East and South Asia] and the North and the West [referring to countries in North America and Europe and to other English-speaking countries], a game of collectivism and individualism, socialism and the struggle of capitalism.’¹⁸ This ideological framing has motivated the CCP’s narratives and continues to shape its foreign propaganda. Treating the narratives on human rights in this way deflects from the actual abuses and their effects on individuals and Uyghur and Turkic Muslim people in Xinjiang and around the world. Both the propaganda activities themselves and the narrative that condemnation of China’s abuses is ideologically driven must be disrupted and countered to frustrate CCP aims and to increase pressure on the CCP as it continues its programs of abuse.



To further develop the CCP's Xinjiang-related narratives, the party is increasing its funding of academic research on influencing international perceptions of Xinjiang and other ideological topics sensitive to the CCP. The 2022 National Social Science Fund (NSSF), set up by the National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Sciences under the CCP's Propaganda Department, called for more projects to support 'telling Xinjiang stories well' and offered ¥350,000 (about US\$55,000) for individual general projects and ¥200,000 (about US\$31,000) for 'youth' projects.¹⁹ The number of projects funded by the NSSF has increased by around 17%, from 4,397 projects in 2016 to 5,141 in 2021.²⁰

In one case, a NSSF grant was awarded to a project titled 'Research on international influence strategy of Xinjiang' (国家社科基金重大特别委托项目'涉疆问题国际传播战略研究')²¹ led by Professor Zheng Liang (郑亮),²² who is the vice president of the School of Journalism and Communication, Jinan University and the president of the Institute for Communication and Borderland Governance within Jinan University.²³ Information about this grant doesn't appear on the official Social Science Fund Research Innovation Service Management Platform, which usually announces almost all of the NSSF's projects.

Professor Zheng Liang's project is an illustrative example of an evolving CCP information operation pipeline in which academic activities flow into online propaganda and engagements with international organisations offline such as the UNHRC. The Institute for Communication and Borderland Governance has published at least two reports that have sought to deny outright various revelations of violations of labour rights in Xinjiang's cotton supply chain and to claim that Xinjiang ethnic minority workers are willingly seeking employment through relocation. Those reports were amplified by Chinese state media and cited in joint press conferences held by the Xinjiang Government and the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁴

From May to July 2021, the Institute for Communication and Borderland Governance organised a series of training sessions titled 'Communicating China' (传播中国) that invited Chinese experts, scholars and industry professionals to give lectures on photography, video editing, film and television production, and nonfiction writing.²⁵ Out of that series, a video blog about Xinjiang's Shache County titled 'Twelve hours of Shache' was produced and promoted at the premier international '2021 Understanding China Conference' (2021年“读懂中国”国际会议), which was attended by international guests and Politburo members including President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang, Yang Jiechi and Huang Kunming.²⁶

At the 43rd session of the UNHRC in February 2020, Zheng Liang gave a presentation on 'Threats to global human rights: transformation of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement' (ETIM) and showed photos of the 'East Turkistan Movement' training children to shout 'jihad' slogans and fire weapons to justify the CCP's governance and counterterrorism policies in Xinjiang (Figure 1).²⁷ However, the US State Department said in 2020 that 'for more than a decade, there has been no credible evidence that ETIM continues to exist' after delisting it from a terrorists list.²⁸

Figure 1: Zheng Liang (left) at the UNHRC's 43rd session



Source: '中国人权研究会在联合国人权理事会举办“中国人权事业的发展进步”主题边会' [The China Society for Human Rights Studies held a side event on the theme of 'Development and progress of China's human rights cause' at the UN Human Rights Council], *China News Network*, 28 February 2020, [online](https://www.chinanews.com).

In March 2022, the *China News Service* (中国新闻社), which is owned by the CCP's United Front Work Department, interviewed Professor Zheng Liang, who claimed that the party's Xinjiang policies aren't about ethnicity or religion but about counterterrorism and de-extremification problems,²⁹ which is a core rationalisation for the CCP's Xinjiang policies and actions used by Chinese state officials. Zheng recommends that Chinese media should engage more in human rights discourse and shift the hierarchy of rights away from individual liberties to 'prosperity and stability, ethnic unity, and religious harmony' as the 'greatest human rights'.³⁰ This follows aspects of the CCP's new colonial policies in the region, which seek to transform, rather than eliminate, the physical and social landscape of Xinjiang.³¹



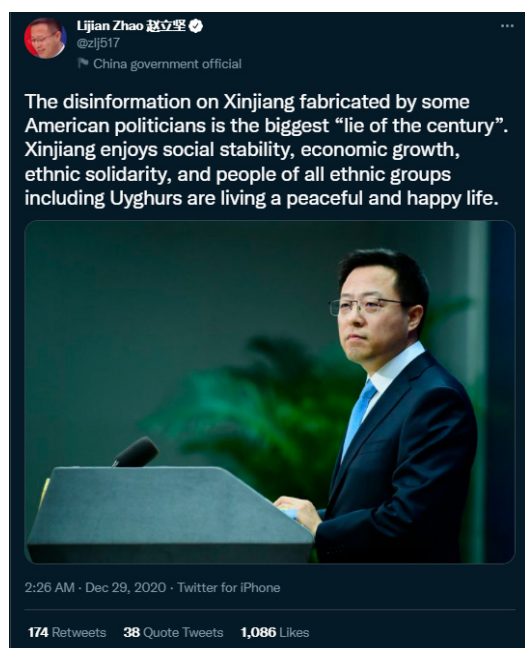
Online information operations related to Xinjiang

This section analyses previous CCP information campaigns on US-based social media platforms and the impact it has had on foreign audiences. We identify three broad information operations categories identified: denial, distractions and deterrence. These tactical methods are deliberately wielded to silence, confuse and persuade states, organisations and individuals and to deter them from critiquing the CCP's human rights record in Xinjiang.

'Deny the "lie of the century"; all Uyghurs are happy'

In response to mounting international pressure, Chinese diplomats and state media pursued an aggressive online communication strategy from early 2020 to deny human rights abuses on US-based social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube and on Chinese-owned TikTok.³² Those accounts amplified content, including disinformation, produced by fringe media and conspiracist websites that were often sympathetic to the narrative positioning of authoritarian regimes. Chinese diplomats asserted that research and reporting by media outlets, think tanks and universities about Xinjiang were the 'lie of the century' (Figure 2),³³ but continued to deny unfettered access to the region for investigators and had no answer to the evidence of abuse and large camps revealed by open-source analysis and imagery.³⁴

Figure 2: Tweet from Chinese diplomat Zhao Lijian

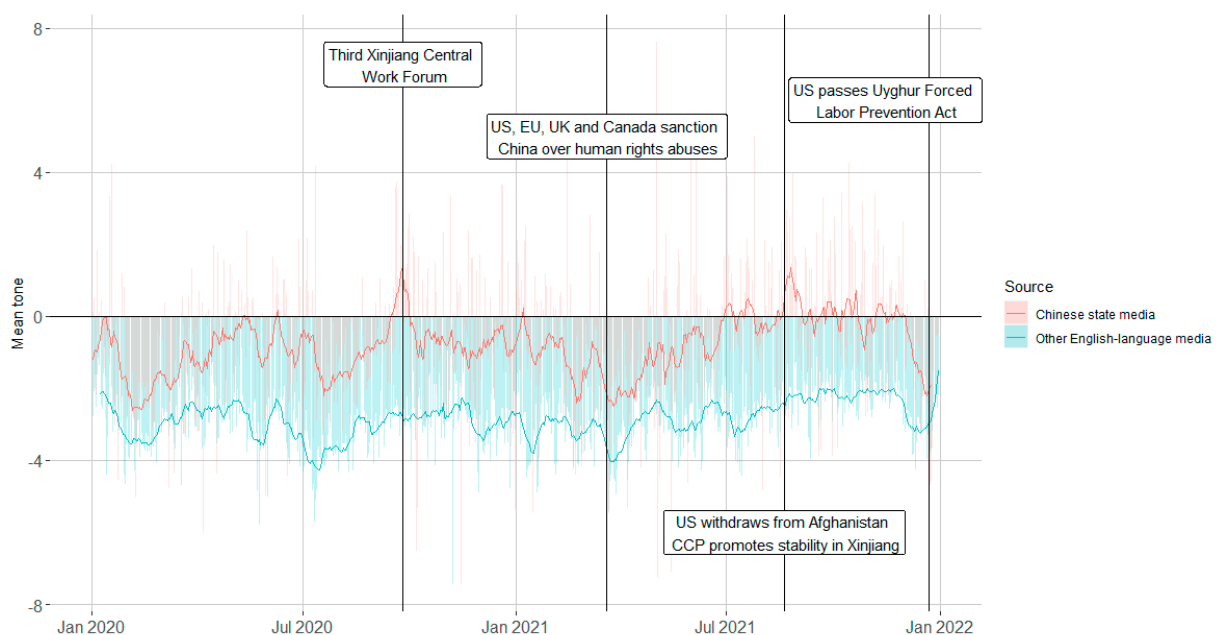


Source: [Twitter](#).

After Xi Jinping's speech at the third Xinjiang Central Work Forum in late 2020, Chinese foreign propaganda workers increased the dissemination of positive depictions of Xinjiang, including imagery of Uyghurs' 'peaceful and happy lives' and Xinjiang's natural landscapes, across US-based social media. To quantitatively measure the differences between articles from Chinese state media and other English-language media outlets, ASPI analysed data from GDELT from the period between

1 January 2020 and 1 January 2022. GDELT collects media content in 65 different languages every 15 minutes, identifies themes such as ‘human rights’ or ‘violence’, and estimates the tone of articles to determine whether they depict positive or negative emotions about the subject matter. Analysis of English-language articles in this dataset found that Chinese state media outlets published 5,962 English-language articles mentioning Xinjiang.³⁵ The tone scores calculated by GDELT for those articles showed that they described the region, on average, more positively across the entire period (Figure 3) and mentioned human rights themes,³⁶ on average, less than other independent English-language media. Of the Xinjiang-related articles published by CCP sources, only 29% mentioned human rights themes, while 50.4% of Xinjiang-related articles by other English-language outlets did so. According to ASPI’s analysis of a sample of Chinese state media articles mentioning Xinjiang, most were closely aligned with CCP government narratives.³⁷ When Chinese state media did mention human rights issues, it was to deny criticism and to convey information about the perceived benefits of development in Xinjiang. For example, a common narrative was that the ‘establishment of the [‘re-education’] centers is an exploratory measure in counter-terrorism and deradicalization’ and ‘came as the government felt the urgent need to protect citizens’ rights’.³⁸

Figure 3: Daily tone of news articles published between 1 January 2020 and 1 January 2022, with 14-day moving average



Note: Tone scores are provided by the GDELT and approximate estimate the sentiment of the news document. Assigning a positive/negative number corresponds to positive/negative sentiment.
Source: Chart created by author from GDELT data.

The campaign to promote positive depictions of Xinjiang was a whole-of-government effort and probably included local provincial- and prefecture-level bureaucracies contributing to Chinese foreign propaganda.³⁹ Some of those online operations were probably contracted out to professional public relations firms, which operated inauthentic accounts on US-based social media platforms.⁴⁰

In early 2021, ASPI uncovered a network of inauthentic Twitter accounts amplifying videos allegedly filmed in Xinjiang from a YouTube channel called ‘昶宇文化Changyu Culture’.⁴¹ The videos appeared to have been created by a company called Changyu Culture, depicted testimonials of Uyghur people supposedly attending ‘vocational centres’ and supported the Chinese Government’s policies in the



region. Procurement documents showed that Changyu Culture was awarded a tender to produce the videos from the Xinjiang Audio-Video Publishing House, which is a publishing organisation owned by Xinjiang's provincial government. The *New York Times* and *ProPublica* concurrently discovered a similar series of Uyghur testimonial videos across Twitter and found that key phrases, such as claims that former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was 'lying' and that they were 'free', were repeated in almost all the videos.⁴²

Those investigations led Twitter, in late 2021, to suspend and publicly disclose two Chinese state-linked networks seeking to influence discourse about Xinjiang.⁴³ ASPI's analysis of those multilanguage datasets found that both networks persistently built inauthentic accounts to amplify Chinese state media content and interacted with official CCP diplomatic accounts, including being referenced by the verified account of Cao Yi (曹毅), a CCP diplomat posted in Lebanon.⁴⁴

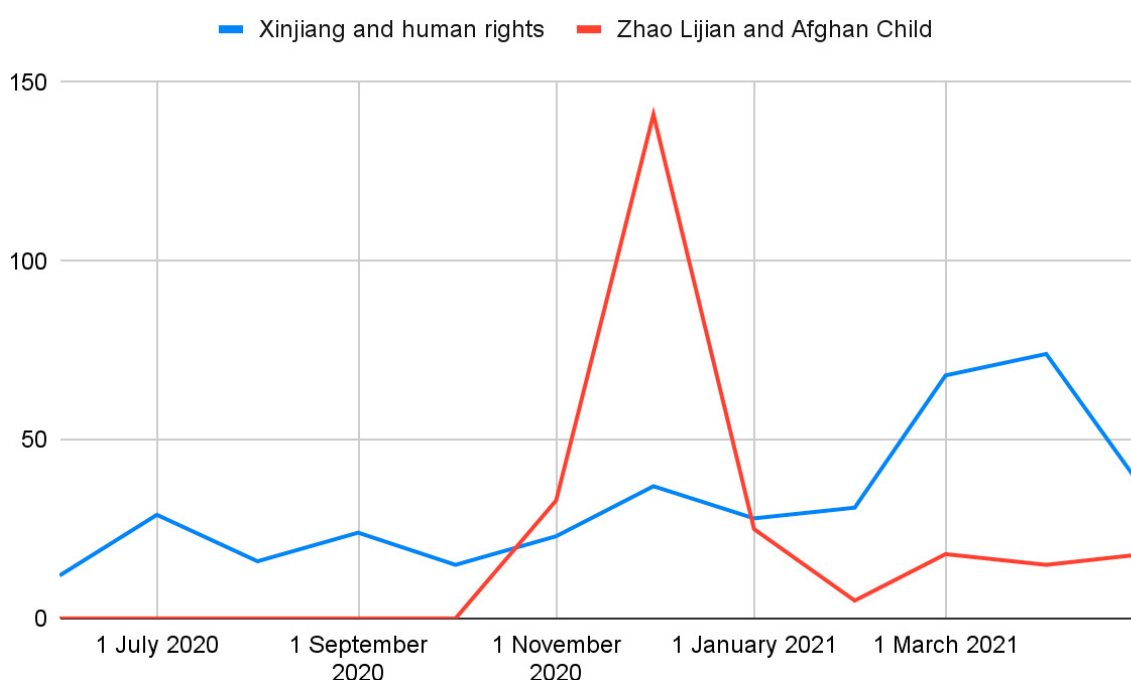
In addition to the increased activity of official accounts and inauthentic networks, the CCP has begun amplifying pro-CCP foreign social media influencers and content creators on YouTube.⁴⁵ Many of those foreign influencers attract viewers and subscribers by criticising mainstream media reporting about Xinjiang. Subsequently, and consequently, they're amplified by CCP official accounts on US-based social media platforms.⁴⁶

Distraction, sentiment mobilisation and issue setting

'Whataboutism' was an effective and favoured tactic used by prominent CCP officials to deflect criticisms of their human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Many Chinese academics and foreign propaganda researchers considered that solely denying human rights abuses in Xinjiang was an unconvincing strategy to counter criticisms of CCP policies in Xinjiang and called for more targeted approaches.⁴⁷ A report titled *Tell the story of Xinjiang well in international comparisons* (国际比较中讲好新疆故事) published by two influential Chinese scholars⁴⁸ suggested using international comparisons with human rights abuses in the US, and other English-speaking countries, to counter criticisms of Xinjiang.⁴⁹ For example, the scholars argue that the CCP should compare its policies in Xinjiang with Western counterterrorism efforts, people's livelihoods and poverty in the US, and deradicalisation programs in the UK (this is the familiar 'whataboutism' approach of shifting the conversation from China's own abuses to current and past events elsewhere).

From late 2020 onwards, Chinese diplomats such as Zhao Lijian (赵立坚), the deputy director of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Information Department, used US-based social media platforms to carefully provoke countries critical of the CCP and briefly monopolise international media attention. After Zhao posted a tweet with an illustration of an Australian soldier slitting the throat of a figure presumed to represent an Afghan child, Australian media outlets published nearly 150 articles about the incident, according to Factiva data (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Number of articles published by Australian media organisations per month about Zhao Lijian and Xinjiang between 1 June 2020 and 1 July 2021



Source: Chart created by author from Factiva data.

This appeared to be an effective short-term distraction but wasn't effective in the long term. In November and December 2020, Zhao Lijian's tweet was reported on four times more often in Australian newspapers than issues involving Xinjiang and human rights. However, human-rights-related Xinjiang reporting returned to predominance in February and March 2021. Zhao's tweet did prompt a response by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison that was criticised for drawing media attention away from the CCP's economic trade coercion and human rights abuses and to Australia's alleged crimes in Afghanistan instead.⁵⁰ Zhang Sinan (张思南), the chief editor of Chinese state-affiliated *Zhixin News*, observed that this case showed how international media could be influenced and the CCP could create a more favourable international public opinion environment by actively framing issues.⁵¹ Overall, this was an at least partly successful example of distraction, although it also amplified interest in Australia in China's own human rights record as a result of many of the responses.

Some Chinese academics have named this rhetorical tactic 'sentiment mobilisation' (情感动员) or 'sentiment coercion' (情感胁迫), and it was originally conceived as a method to gain political support in domestic populations or to co-opt organisations.⁵² In 2021, Zhao Lijian and Chinese state media repeatedly used this tactic against multiple countries that shifted their foreign policy about China. In response to Japan describing China as a 'strong' concern in its diplomatic 'Blue Book' and raising concerns over the situation in Hong Kong and Xinjiang,⁵³ Zhao Lijian in an April 2021 tweet took advantage of concerns about Japan dumping radioactive water by using a modified version of Hokusai's painting, 'The Great Wave off Kanagawa'.⁵⁴ Likewise, in June 2021, Canada led an international coalition at the UN calling on China to allow investigators free access into Xinjiang. According to DFRLab analysis, Chinese state media in response published 85 articles between 18 June 2021 and 11 July 2021 about 1,100 unmarked graves that had been found at four former

Canadian residential schools for indigenous children (Figure 5).⁵⁵ Those articles were promoted by at least 24 different Chinese state-affiliated Twitter accounts, which referenced Canada in more than 270 tweets, compared to only 146 mentions of the US in June 2021.

Figure 5: Tweet by Zha Liyou, Consul-General of China in Kolkata, India, about human rights abuses in Canada, the US and the UK



Source: Twitter.

These efforts were aspects of a broader CCP campaign seeking to deflect attention away from empirical research about Xinjiang by highlighting human rights issues within democratic countries.⁵⁶ In previous social media manipulation campaigns on Twitter, coordinated inauthentic networks linked to the Chinese state tried to create a perception of a moral equivalence between the suppression of protests in Hong Kong and the US Government's response to its own domestic protests during the Black Lives Matter campaign.⁵⁷ This strategy leverages existing anti-US sentiments and co-opts domestic tensions over issues of racism to sow discord in others' domestic jurisdictions and cast doubt on critics of the CCP.⁵⁸

Other CCP distraction tactics sought to create political partisanship over Xinjiang discourse by falsely claiming that all criticisms and research were smear campaigns from the 'right' (which the CCP associates with white supremacy) and US imperialism (which it associates with the military-industrial complex). That isn't true, as revelations of and criticisms of human rights abuses in Xinjiang have come from journalists and leaders from across the political spectrum and have been reported by independent human rights organisations and condemned by governments and civil society organisations in many non-English-speaking countries.⁵⁹

In the case of researchers and journalists who have published influential research related to Xinjiang, Chinese foreign propaganda usually seeks to undermine their work by associating it with racism or political conservatism. German academic Adrian Zenz, who has published many important findings about Xinjiang,⁶⁰ has been framed as a far-right Christian or a ‘US flunky’ by Chinese state media and diplomats despite using Chinese Government documents to support his findings.⁶¹ Zenz was mentioned in at least 199 articles published by Chinese state media (according to GDELT data) and in at least 529 tweets on Twitter by Chinese diplomatic and state media accounts between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2021 (according to ASPI’s data collection and analysis for this report). Damaging the reputations of critics of the CCP is a means of reducing the impact of such individuals’ or organisations’ analysis, and doesn’t require any real engagement with their analyses.

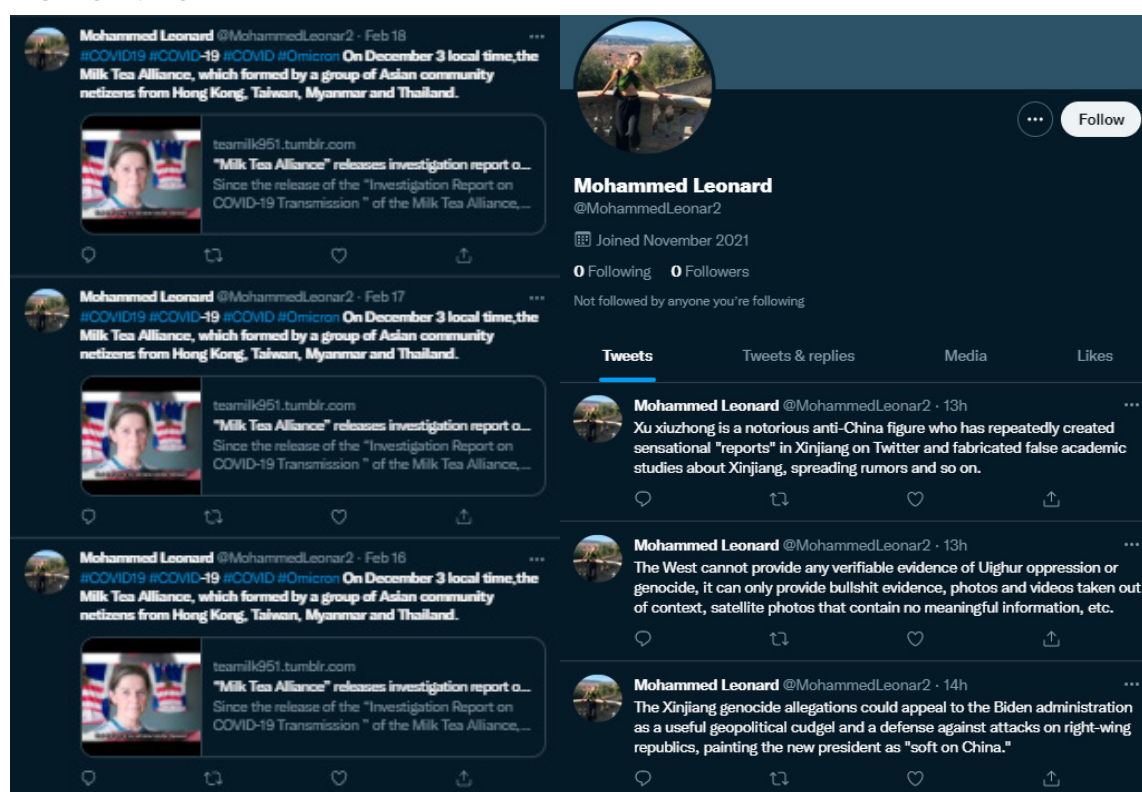
Deter, coerce and impose costs

In coordination with denial and distraction tactics to shift international public opinion on human rights abuses in Xinjiang, the CCP is exporting its domestic digital repression tools abroad to smear, silence and impose costs on individuals and organisations who speak up. That includes direct physical violence, smear campaigns, targeted trolling, threats of sexual violence, cyber operations and economic sanctions.

The decision by Ofcom (the British broadcasting regulator) on 4 February 2021 to withdraw the UK broadcast licence of the China Global Television Network (*CGTN*), in combination with British Broadcasting Corporation (*BBC*) reporting on allegations of systematic sexual assaults in internment camps and forced labour in Xinjiang’s cotton industry, probably triggered a CCP-coordinated information campaign to attempt to undermine the *BBC*’s credibility and deter it from publishing stories critical of the Chinese state.⁶² In January and February 2021, Chinese state media, pro-CCP influencers and ‘patriotic’ trolls on US-based social media pushed three narratives claiming that the *BBC* spreads disinformation on China, that UK audiences think the broadcaster is biased and that its reporting on China is instigated by foreign actors and intelligence agencies.

More sophisticated and targeted CCP-linked online operations have sought to harass and smear individuals. These types of harassment campaigns have occurred since as far back as 2015, when French journalist Ursula Gauthier was subjected to scathing editorials in Chinese state media and faced death threats online for her article about Beijing’s ‘pitiless repression’ of the Uyghurs.⁶³ Other journalists and researchers have been targeted by state-linked smear campaigns that hid their comments among spammy content. Analysis of a pro-CCP inauthentic network in 2022 found that more than 8,000 accounts shared links to a Tumblr blog that supported a conspiracy theory that alleges that the US Army’s Fort Detrick was the origin of Covid-19 (Figure 6).⁶⁴ Among generic and repetitive posts, accounts also directly replied to other legitimate Twitter accounts attempting to draw attention to scathing remarks about former ASPI analysts.

Figure 6: Mohammed Leonard's account spamming a blog post claiming that Covid-19 originated in the US but also targeting Xinjiang-related research



Source: Twitter.

Some of those accounts belonged to a separate but related network of accounts flooding the #accelerationism hashtag on Twitter that also posted supportive messages under tweets that aligned with CCP narratives about Xinjiang.⁶⁵ For example, one Twitter account with the handle @jodie_leighton has two followers and uses the hashtags #accelerationism and #加速王 ('Acceleration King'—a euphemism for Xi Jinping that trended on domestic Chinese social media⁶⁶) to spread both news articles about the global energy crisis and screenshots from the racing game 'Need For Speed'. The timeline of this account shows that it previously posted content consistent with an emerging iteration of the pro-CCP Spamouflage network, which Twitter has attributed to the Chinese state.⁶⁷ When this account wasn't posting tweets, it was replying to pro-CCP influencers or local media outlets within Australia to boost their engagements on stories that aligned with CCP propaganda narratives. These efforts create positive emotional incentives over time—via reinforced positive engagement online—to support views favourable to the CCP, while deterring and generating disincentives to post critical comments about the CCP.

Other activities in cyberspace allow plausible deniability for the CCP to surveil and disrupt dissident voices among the Uyghur and other minority diaspora communities. This further restricts information about Xinjiang and deters other Uyghurs abroad from speaking out. For example, Meta said it had taken actions in early 2021 against a group of Chinese state-linked hackers who were surveilling activists, journalists and dissidents primarily among Uyghurs from Xinjiang living in Turkey, Kazakhstan, the US, Syria, Australia, Canada and other countries.⁶⁸ In 2022, News Corp hired cybersecurity firm Mandiant to investigate a hack by a group with a 'China nexus' that was

collecting intelligence about Taiwan, the Uyghur ethnic group and other topics.⁶⁹ It's possible that the surveillance in these cases was intended to be detected for a deterrence effect and that data collected in these efforts will probably contribute to improving future information operations.

CCP online operations are coordinated with a full spectrum of offline activities. In retaliation against EU sanctions on Chinese officials involved in human rights abuses in Xinjiang, the CCP unjustifiably imposed sanctions on 10 European individuals, including members of the European Parliament, and four European institutions for apparently spreading 'disinformation'.⁷⁰

According to Freedom House's catalogue of state-linked direct, physical attacks since 2014, at least 214 cases (the most of any country) have originated from China and showed that the CCP 'conducts the most sophisticated, global, and comprehensive campaign of transnational repression in the world.'⁷¹ The combination of those deterrence efforts has severe emotional and psychological impacts.⁷²



Assessment of impact

This section analyses the impact of CCP information operations relating to Xinjiang on four types of audiences: social media users, government officials, international media outlets, and global corporations. My assessment of these datasets found that CCP efforts to date to deny, distract from and deter revelations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang have silenced and persuaded some international audiences.

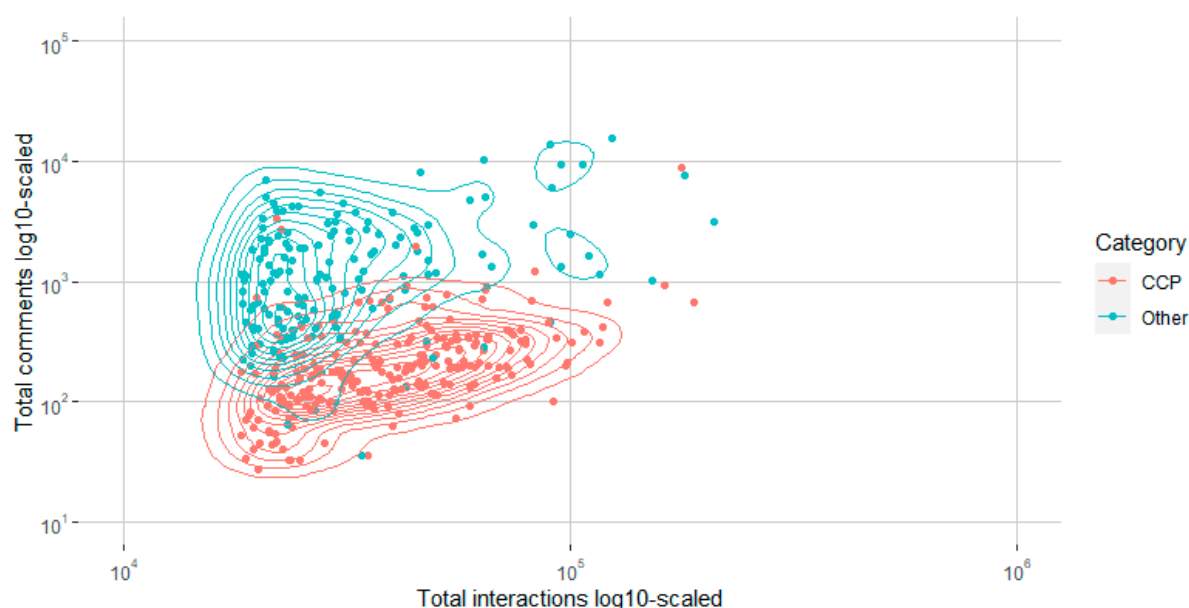
Social media users

Chinese diplomatic and state media accounts have some of the highest engagements on US-based social media platforms, crowding out alternative and other voices critical of the CCP. ASPI analysed 613,301 Facebook posts and 6,780,809 Twitter tweets between 1 January 2020 and 1 January 2022 mentioning 'Xinjiang' in English, Mandarin, Arabic, Japanese and other languages. Of the top 400 Facebook posts with the most interactions (including reactions and shares), 60.3% were posted by Chinese state media and diplomats. Of the top 1,000 Twitter tweets with the most interactions (including likes and retweets), 5.5% were posted by Chinese state media and diplomats, and 4% were from accounts suspended by Twitter for platform manipulation.

The high engagement numbers of CCP posts doesn't suggest that the CCP messages were necessarily influential, as open-source research has shown that those engagement metrics have probably been inauthentically increased via automation or paid personnel, as opposed to independent social media users. Increasing the engagement metrics could be used to make these accounts appear more popular than they actually are in order to achieve greater influence, but the metrics could also be manipulated by operators to convince auditors that key performance indicators were met (perhaps where payment is involved and future business is dependent on results).

The University of Oxford found in 2021 that a considerable portion of engagements with CCP-affiliated accounts on Twitter came from accounts that Twitter eventually suspended for platform violations.⁷³ Similar social media manipulation occurs on Facebook but is more difficult to distinguish from legitimate user behaviour. Of the top 400 Facebook posts mentioning Xinjiang collected by ASPI, there was a statistically significant difference in the number of comments under posts by non-CCP Facebook accounts compared to posts from CCP-affiliated accounts with similar numbers of total interactions (Figure 7).⁷⁴ Facebook posts by CCP-affiliated accounts tend to have fewer comments compared to posts by other accounts with a similar number of interactions. This was one indication that the interaction rate of the CCP accounts was probably deceptively amplified.

Figure 7: Total number of comments and interactions of Facebook posts mentioning Xinjiang published between 1 January 2020 and 1 January 2022, coloured by affiliation with the CCP



Source: Plot created by author from CrowdTangle data.

ASPI's analysis of a sample of the top 20 Chinese state media Facebook posts mentioning Xinjiang found that the number of interactions for each post decreased by nearly 4,000 interactions, on average, from an initial maximum reached in the period between 1 January 2020 and 1 January 2022 compared to the number of interactions observed on 21 March 2022, according to CrowdTangle.⁷⁵ For example, the number of interactions of a January 2020 post by CGTN sharing a link to an article referencing *The Grayzone* observed on 21 March 2022 was 10,000 less than the maximum number of interactions reached in the period between 1 January 2020 and 1 January 2022.⁷⁶ The most plausible explanation for the decrease was that accounts reacting to the post were deleted from Facebook for platform manipulation and that resulted in their interactions being deducted from Chinese state media posts. There may also be an element of waning interest in targeting social media audiences by CCP operatives.

Most official Chinese state media and diplomatic accounts now have state-affiliated labels, which may have decreased their share of shares and likes.⁷⁷ However, those posts still flood US-based social media platforms with pro-CCP content and crowd out critical opinions about the CCP by reducing the efficacy of hashtags such as #Xinjiang or #GenocideGames.⁷⁸ The amplification of third parties such as social media influencers or fringe media outlets has had some successes, too, in influencing senior international figures.⁷⁹ Most of those influencers and individuals possibly had pre-existing pro-CCP views but are increasingly seeing their voices amplified by official CCP entities and appear more emboldened to shape public discourse within democratic countries.⁸⁰

Even if Chinese foreign propaganda currently receives little authentic engagement online, CCP information operations and propaganda activities are evolving and learning from experience, backed by being seen as a priority means of shaping international discourse in favour of the CCP.

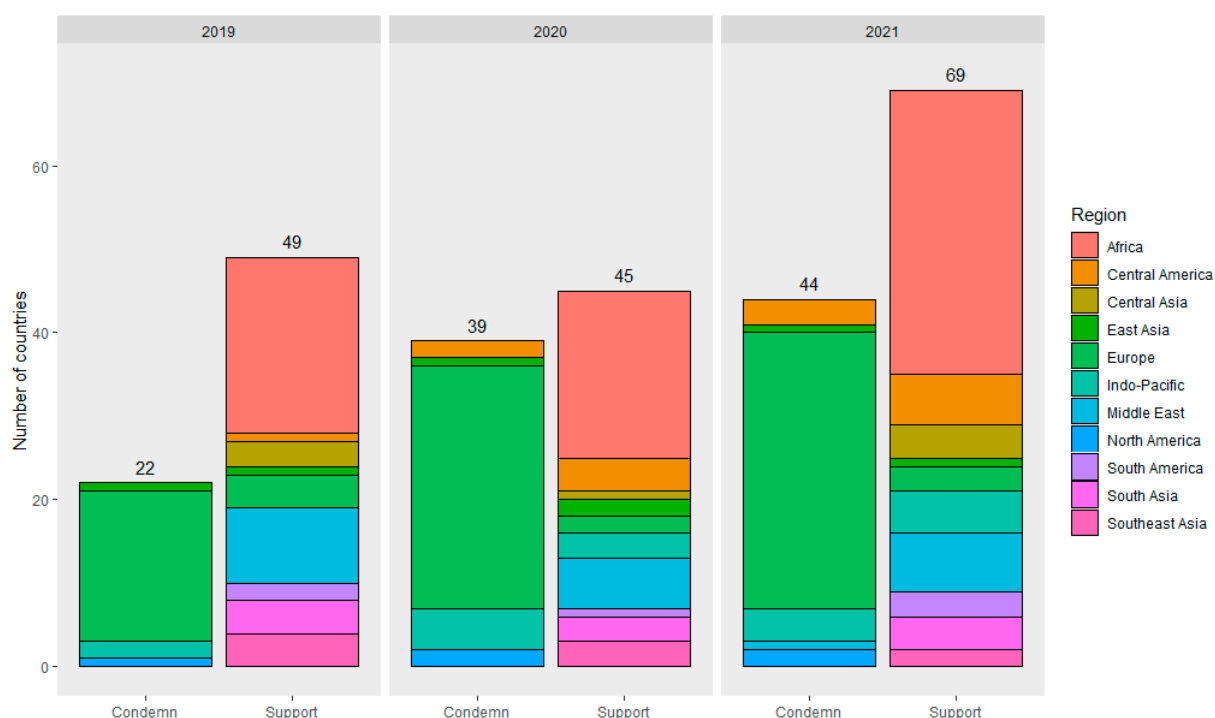
Beyond that evolution, even now, flooding the internet with pro-CCP content has national security implications for algorithms or artificial intelligence (AI) models that are trained on social media and other open-source data. Initial indications that this may be an issue were flagged when OpenAI's GPT-3 allegedly said it couldn't answer questions about Xinjiang because it was 'too sensitive', reflecting some pro-CCP positions on the issue.⁸¹ The experimenter, Samuel Hammond, hypothesised that the Chinese Government publishes far more content than independent sources about Xinjiang, so pro-CCP narratives were likely to have been heavily weighted when GPT-3 was trained on online text.⁸² Inherent bias in AI models resulting from flaws and biases in the data that the AI algorithms consume and develop from isn't new; however, biases produced by deliberate, large-volume propaganda activities haven't featured much in AI discussions to date.

Government officials

Online CCP information operations have been closely coordinated with targeted offline diplomatic engagements that involved Chinese diaspora organisations and embassies and targeted senior government officials and representatives globally. For example, the phrase 'Xinjiang is a wonderful land' (新疆是个好地方) was the eighth most used hashtag in an information operation campaign linked to the Chinese state by Twitter.⁸³ Likewise, Chinese embassies showed a series of five propaganda videos titled 'Xinjiang is a wonderful land' to journalists and government representatives in host countries more than 70 times in more than 30 countries in 2021. This made it difficult to distinguish causative factors due to online campaigns from offline propaganda events.

ASPI's analysis of countries that have supported or condemned CCP policies at UNHRC sessions found them to be divided along continental and regional lines. As of 2021, 69 countries supported China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang, 44 countries had condemned its abuses and 24 countries had withdrawn their support since 2019 and 2020 (Figure 8). Most countries that have supported the CCP in the face of revelations of human rights abuses were in Africa or the Middle East, while countries that have condemned CCP policies were mostly in Europe or were predominantly English-speaking or democratic nations (for example, Japan). Most notable is the silence of governments in Muslim-majority and non-Western countries. Of the 57 members state in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), only Albania and more recently Turkey have condemned the CCP for its policies in Xinjiang. This is unusual, given that the OIC typically seeks to protect global Muslim populations. For example, in 2019, the Gambia filed a case on behalf of the OIC at the International Court of Justice against Myanmar for its atrocities against the ethnic Muslim Rohingya population.⁸⁴

Figure 8: Countries supporting or condemning CCP human rights abuses in Xinjiang at UNHRC sessions, 2019 to 2021



Source: Chart created by author.

Whether a country supported or condemned CCP abuses in Xinjiang probably depended on a range of complex covariates, such as existing bilateral relationships, foreign investment, trade, financial aid, and domestic political status (including the resonance of issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of domestic ethnic and subnational tensions, for example). Of those covariates, statistical tests found Freedom House's index for political rights and civil liberties to be the most significant indicator. That didn't show there was causation, but it supports the hypothesis that government officials from those countries are likely to be less responsive to their citizens' concerns about human rights abuses in Xinjiang and may also be concerned about the potential for human rights issues in their own countries to attract similar international criticism and pressure.

CCP online and offline narratives also sought to divide countries between the 'East' and the 'West' on human rights issues and were probably effective at influencing government representatives from Africa, Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. For example, Chinese diplomats and state media claim that human rights are used to 'interfere in China's domestic affairs' and have exported that messaging to other countries.⁸⁵ In August 2021, China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, spoke to Ethiopian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Demeke Mekonnen and said that China was opposed to 'external forces interfering in Ethiopia's internal affairs under the pretext of human rights',⁸⁶ referring to accusations of human rights violations by Ethiopian federal forces.⁸⁷ This narrative is still being propagated by Chinese officials despite the clear tension between such purported support for state sovereignty and Beijing's quiet but clear support for Russia's 'legitimate security interests' in its war in Ukraine—a state whose sovereignty Beijing recognised in 1992.

In other countries, CCP information operations probably created plausible deniability for some government officials to publicly support the CCP internationally and in their engagement with their own domestic populations. For example, former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan said that

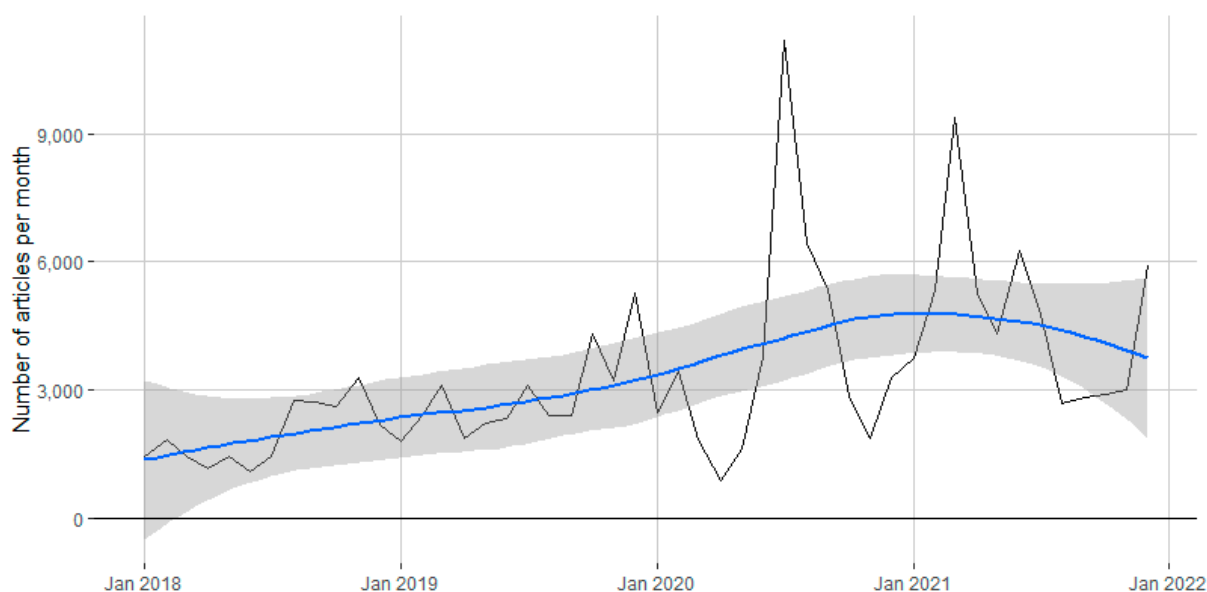
Pakistan has a ‘very strong relationship with China, and because [they] have a relationship based on trust ... [Pakistanis] actually accept the Chinese version.’⁸⁸ He didn’t explain how such trust overcame the evidence of Chinese abuses.

To counter the increasing number of countries condemning the CCP’s policies in Xinjiang, the party has held conferences showing the ‘Xinjiang is a wonderful land’ videos mostly in those countries. Other press conferences have been held in countries on the margin, such as Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Senegal and Turkey, which haven’t supported or condemned CCP policies in Xinjiang at UNHRC sessions.⁸⁹ A video exchange was also held in Kazakhstan, which had previously supported CCP policies in Xinjiang but withdrew its support in 2020.⁹⁰ The Chinese state has also conducted curated and carefully orchestrated tours of Xinjiang, such as the recent visit by the UN’s High Commissioner for Human Rights.⁹¹

International media outlets

Access to accurate information about Xinjiang has become more difficult and has stymied the frequency of international reporting about Xinjiang. According to GDELT data, the number of English-language articles about Xinjiang increased between 2018 and 2021 but fell in the second half of 2021 (Figure 9). This was probably due to a combination of international journalists being expelled from China, further restrictions on access to Xinjiang, and Covid-19 restrictions.

Figure 9: Number of English-language articles mentioning Xinjiang, per month, 2018 to 2022, with local polynomial regression fitting



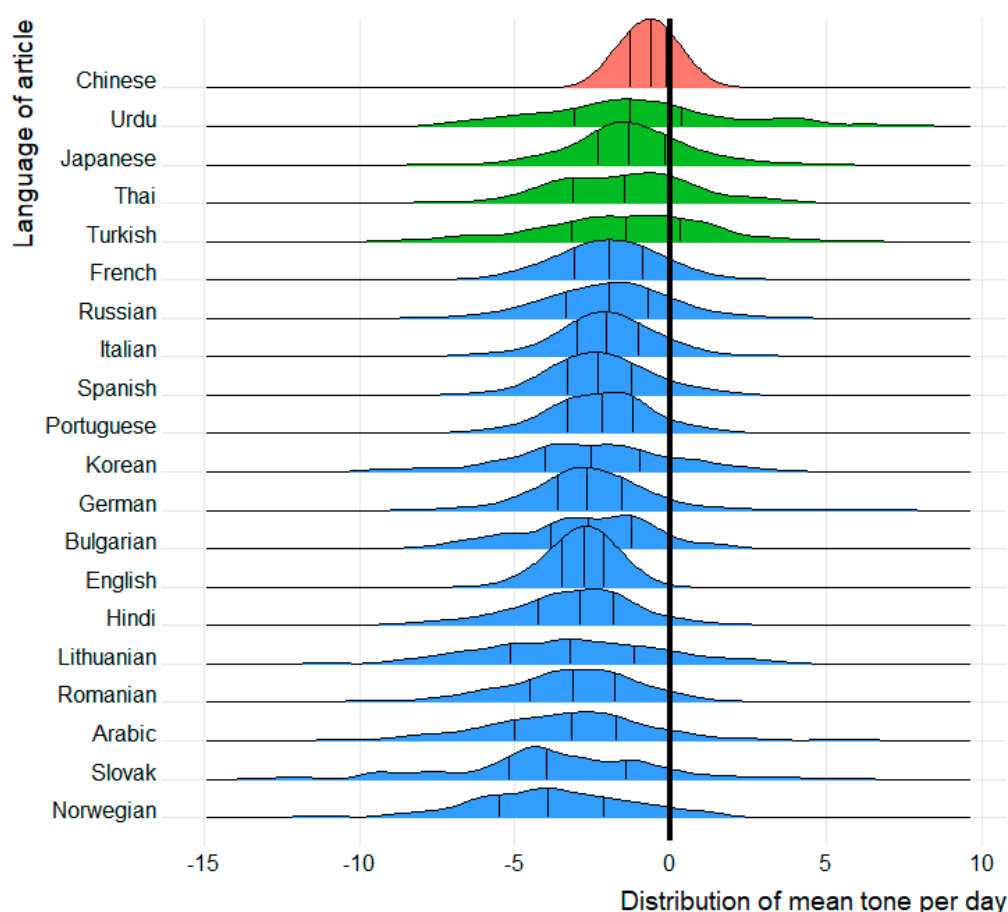
Source: Chart created by author from GDELT data.

CCP deterrence efforts targeting the *BBC* and other English-language news outlets didn’t appear to have further affected the frequency or tone of their reporting about human rights issues in Xinjiang. According to GDELT data, the CCP campaign targeting the *BBC* had little effect on the frequency of subsequent *BBC* reports and little effect on the tone or substance of reporting relating to Xinjiang in comparison with similar news outlets.⁹²

Beyond English-language media, articles about Xinjiang weren't reported with the same frequency or with the same sentiment. For this report, the emotional tone of articles calculated by GDELT was used to infer differences in the media environments of audiences in different languages. Tone scores were calculated by GDELT, which assigned tone scores to indicate how positively or negatively the author dealt with the article's subject. Tone scores were then aggregated by day and averaged to find correlations in article sentiments across different languages.

ASPI analysed 494,710 articles, published in more than 65 languages, mentioning Xinjiang from GDELT's database between 1 January 2021 and 1 January 2022 (Figure 10). Most articles were published in Chinese (55%) or English (35%). Of the top 20 languages, Chinese-language articles were more likely to convey more positive assessments of Chinese state policy and action on Xinjiang. Statistically similar results came from the analysis of articles published in Urdu, which is one of the official languages of Pakistan. That wasn't surprising, given the strong political and economic relationship between leaders in Pakistan and China and self-censorship by Pakistani journalists and editors due to increasing government 'regulation', disappearances of dissidents and police complaints.⁹³

Figure 10: Distribution of mean tone of articles per day by top 20 language sources, ordered from most positive mean tone average to least positive mean tone; positive/negative numbers represent positive/negative sentiment, while a zero tone score indicates neutral reporting



Source: Chart created by author from GDELT data.

Those quantitative results were supported by qualitative analysis of Xinjiang reporting samples in the respective countries. The similarity in tone between Japanese-language articles and Urdu, Thai and Turkish articles was unexpected, but Japan's position on Xinjiang has historically been criticised by Human Rights Watch as 'lukewarm'.⁹⁴ This may have been influenced by online CCP information operations, but ASPI wasn't able to disregard other causative factors, such as language barriers to access to English-language research about Xinjiang.

Global corporations

Chinese domestic public opinion, as inflamed by state media reporting, is increasingly influential in shifting global corporate behaviours and can be manipulated by the CCP as a tool of economic coercion. In 2020, negative comments on Chinese- and English-language social media from patriotic citizens, boycotts from Chinese celebrities and the removal of brands from Chinese domestic websites were all targeted at major corporations that had responded to allegations of Xinjiang-related forced labour in their supply chains.⁹⁵ A significant portion of the online commentary was directed by Communist Youth League volunteers and professional online commentators,⁹⁶ but the majority of the comments were probably second-order effects of Chinese Government and state media messaging that encouraged Chinese citizens to disseminate patriotic views on Chinese- and English-language social media. Chinese state media are used to amplify and channel that patriotic outrage against companies not acting in accordance with the CCP's desires.

ASPI collected corporate responses from media articles and a Business and Human Rights Resource Centre dataset.⁹⁷ Analysis of that dataset found that, of the 20 major companies that had expressed concerns about forced labour in their supply chains, six companies had retracted their statements following a backlash, at least five companies publicly promoted their support of Xinjiang cotton, and at least two companies have since altered their statements to not explicitly reference Xinjiang. Similar statistics were recorded in ASPI's *The Chinese Communist Party's coercive diplomacy*, which found that 82.7% of companies targeted by CCP coercion issued apologies and that almost no companies had their own governments step up to help them respond.⁹⁸

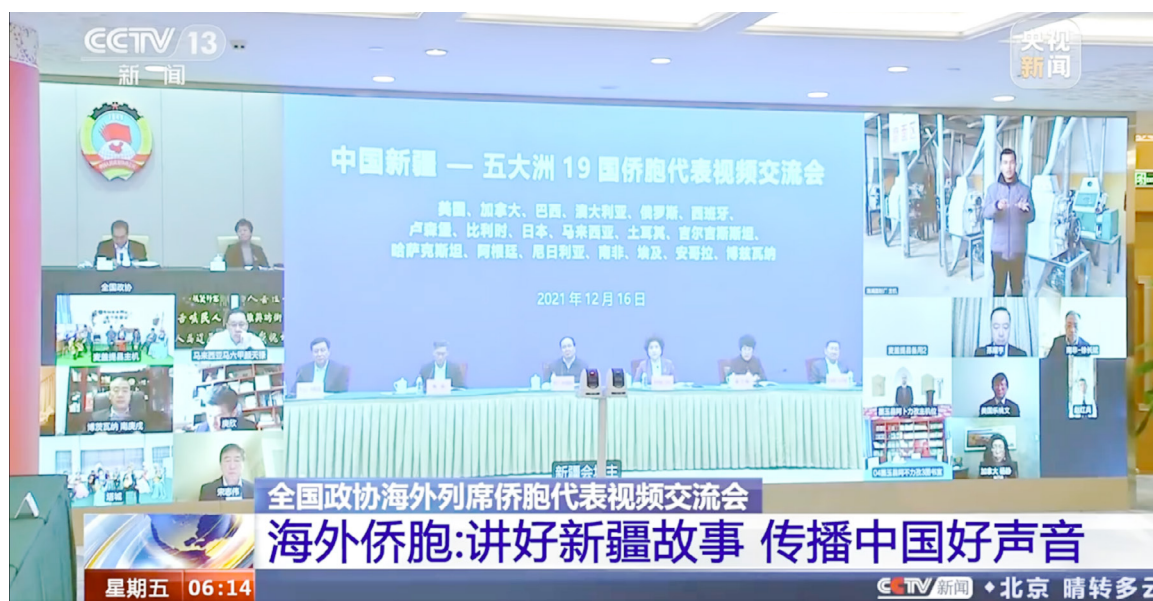
Future CCP information operations and overseas Chinese

Due to US-based platforms increasingly removing CCP-linked coordinated inauthentic networks, the limited number of authentic engagements with those networks and the increasing number of conferences about Xinjiang held by the CCP's united front system, it's likely that the CCP will seek to further co-opt overseas Chinese diaspora groups to influence perceptions of Xinjiang among senior political leaders abroad.

From 13 to 15 October 2021, members of the Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan Overseas Chinese Committee of the National Committee of the CPPCC and the overseas Chinese diaspora were invited to observe the economic development and social stability in Xinjiang in person.⁹⁹ Members selected by the CPPCC included Zhao Hongbing,¹⁰⁰ Tian Changyi,¹⁰¹ Wu Hao,¹⁰² Han Jie,¹⁰³ Yao Bin,¹⁰⁴ Shi Qianping,¹⁰⁵ Tang Lin,¹⁰⁶ Ni Tieping,¹⁰⁷ Xu Changbin¹⁰⁸ and Chen Ping.¹⁰⁹ Those members promised that 'it is necessary to disseminate the true stories seen in Xinjiang to the upper class of the western countries to the greatest extent, actively promote exchanges between all walks of life in Xinjiang and mainstream western society, and make positive contributions to promoting economic and trade exchanges between Xinjiang and the rest of the world.'¹¹⁰ Likewise, in December 2021, the Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan Overseas Chinese Committee of the National Committee of the CPPCC also held a video conference promoting the 'Xinjiang is a wonderful land' video to 25 overseas Chinese from 19 countries.¹¹¹

Senior leaders in organisations linked to the United Front Work Department are also calling upon overseas Chinese globally to support the CCP narratives on Xinjiang. In an interview with CCTV13 reporters, Tian Changyi¹¹² said 'there are 60 million overseas Chinese in the world. If everyone can do a good job, you can help to tell Chinese stories well.'¹¹³ 'Telling China's stories well' is of course a signature Xi Jinping line (Figure 11). In the same news segment, Han Jie¹¹⁴ said that China should use some targeted propagation methods and be good at 'managing a true Xinjiang international image to be accepted by the people around the world'.

Figure 11: Overseas Chinese 'telling Xinjiang's story well' and 'spreading the good voice of China'



Source: CCTV.

More recently, in February 2022, senior CPPCC official Qiu Yuanping¹¹⁵ noted that overseas Chinese should speak about Xinjiang to other international communities to create a conducive international public opinion environment for Xinjiang's development and long-term stability.¹¹⁶ In addition, Qiu explicitly stated that the future of strategic competition between the US and China will require the CCP to more actively mobilise overseas Chinese to support the international image of China and Xinjiang.¹¹⁷ Note that 'overseas Chinese' are mainly citizens in other countries, who don't owe allegiance to the CCP or to the Chinese state. Yet they're seen by China's leaders as having obligations to demonstrate such allegiance by disseminating propaganda messages on behalf of the CCP. Qiu also recommended that the CCP promote exchanges and cooperation between Chinese domestic media and overseas Chinese media, and more actively guide overseas Chinese to promote trade, cultural education, high-quality development and participation in Xinjiang as part of the CCP's Belt and Road Initiative.¹¹⁸

Conclusion and recommendations

This report shows that the CCP is continuing to exploit US-based social media platforms to influence unwitting audiences beyond China's territory. Countries that seek to uphold human rights and liberties should be concerned about the successes of CCP information operations and the relentless resourcing and development of PRC propaganda on Xinjiang to obscure Chinese Government abuses. This includes the increasing number of countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America supporting CCP policies in Xinjiang, the silence of governments in Muslim-majority countries, and corporations backtracking on statements about labour rights.

Governments and civil society organisations in democratic states shouldn't be shy in using the freedoms in their own jurisdictions to speak out against CCP abuses and to mobilise support within their own societies and corporate sectors and internationally. The contrast between being able to exercise those freedoms in many parts of the world compared to the stark and large-scale abuses being inflicted on China's Uyghurs and Turkic Muslim populations would be a powerful demonstration of the scale of suffering in Xinjiang.

Social media platforms have implemented inconsistent policies and are constrained by their commercial interests. Some policies, such as labelling state media accounts and articles, have reduced the spread of misleading and deceptive content; however, they aren't preventing other harms from online information operations, such as crowding out critical commentary on human rights violations, deterring individuals from criticising states and reducing trust in democratic institutions.

CCP information operations targeting Xinjiang narratives and human rights abuses need to be countered now to mitigate the CCP's global campaign of transnational repression. Achieving that requires governments and civil society to work more closely with social media platforms and broadcasters to deter and expose propaganda organisations and operatives. Governments, which are held accountable to democratic processes, must lead the policymaking process in coordination with allies and partners with shared interests.

Economic sanctions regimes that target the perpetrators of serious human rights violations and abuses should be expanded to include the distributors of disinformation and foreign propaganda who silence, intimidate and continue the abuse of the survivors and victims of human rights violations. This would be consistent with sanctions imposed by the Australian Government,¹¹⁹ in coordination with other governments in the US, the UK and Europe,¹²⁰ on Russian propagandists and state media for spreading disinformation and propaganda during Putin's war in Ukraine. A sanctions regime could be expanded to include organisations and individuals who meet the following country-agnostic criteria. The target would be any foreign entity that simultaneously:

- is affiliated with a government organisation
- lacks independence from the state—either directly or indirectly through coercion
- repeatedly disseminates demonstrably false information,¹²¹ including political propaganda and false news content, or amplifies content in a deceptive manner.¹²²



Economic sanctions would incentivise social media platforms to de-platform accounts, or at a minimum de-monetise them. This would curb disinformation and foreign propaganda outside of times of conflict, undermine capabilities during conflicts and deter future campaigns. Government agencies should work closely with civil society organisations and social media platforms to collect evidence to justify the rationale for listing entities. The justification and evidence should then be published publicly and transparently to counter CCP narratives and inform public audiences.

Some may object to this suggestion by saying it would mirror the authoritarian policies of the CCP. However, that assumes a false moral equivalence and overlooks the fact that the type of speech being controlled isn't free speech, but authoritarian content dictated by the interests of the CCP. Unlike individuals living in open, free, democratic societies, the CCP has no implicit rights of free speech inside other societies. Independent media organisations in democracies are fundamentally different from state-controlled media organisations in China and Russia, where those organisations are arms of the state used to control the information environment and protect the stability and security of the ruling party.¹²³

Another objection could be that this restriction could undermine the freedom of speech in democracies and lead to censorship of domestic media. Historically, freedom of speech in democracies has been intended to protect citizens from coercion by their own state authorities and can be limited if there's a legitimate purpose and the limiting is necessary and proportional, as is the case during time of war, for example. The restrictions outlined above are intended to counter foreign state coercion and are only to be applied to a narrow class of foreign-state-affiliated entities that disseminate disinformation and deceptively amplify their content. Those sanctions are the minimum necessary precautions to deter authoritarian states from spreading and testing harmful narratives and are proportional to the extent of those states' manipulation of US-based social media. In addition, economic sanctions can only be applied to foreign entities outside the legislating country's jurisdiction and can prevent domestic authorities targeting their political rivals.

A final objection might be that restrictions on these accounts could be used in the CCP's foreign propaganda to portray democratic governments as somehow acting against democratic principles. This involves accepting the false equivalences outlined above. A further response to that claim is that CCP foreign propaganda already asserts this, and it's unclear whether the assertion has any impact. In contrast, it would be a strategic mistake to wait until Chinese state media can further effectively manipulate US-based platforms to shift public opinion before restricting those media.

Emerging innovations in natural language processing (which make it easier to generate native-level phrases) and strategic data sources from public opinion monitoring companies, left unaddressed, will improve the persuasiveness of Chinese information operations in the long term while they remain on US-based platforms deterring individuals and organisations from critiquing the CCP's human rights record. In the meantime, the CCP will continue to test narratives online, seek to shift international media norms and direct party-controlled political groups to undermine human rights. International organisations, such as the UN, will increasingly be targeted by CCP information operations and are at risk of being co-opted, too.¹²⁴

Appendix: Supplementary data

Table 1: Number of National Social Science Fund projects, 2016 to 2021

Total numbers of NSSF projects						
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
NSSF annual projects	2,856	3,193	3,505	3,534	3,547	3,539
NSSF youth projects	1,061	1,096	1,001	1,093	1,078	1,103
NSSF Western projects	480	492	490	492	496	499
Total numbers of NSSF projects, by project type						
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
NSSF annual projects—key projects (¥350,000)	282	343	358	349	363	370
NSSF annual projects—general projects (¥200,000)	2,574	2,850	3,147	3,185	3,184	3,169

Table 2: Decrease in Facebook reactions for Top 20 Chinese state media posts mentioning Xinjiang published between 1 January 2020 and 1 January 2022

Post URL	Maximum number of reactions reached in 2020 and 2021	Number of reactions observed on 21 March 2022	Difference
https://www.facebook.com/565225540184937/posts/4170120919695363	192,433	185,810	-6,623
https://www.facebook.com/691246177723161/posts/1654006934780409	146,864	146,864	0
https://www.facebook.com/338109312883186/posts/5041321275895276	155,874	153,476	-2,398
https://www.facebook.com/565225540184937/posts/4596954890345295	123,410	118,417	-4,993
https://www.facebook.com/100044504436603/posts/427549185405226	117,977	116,872	-1,105
https://www.facebook.com/565225540184937/posts/4320522001321920	123,700	116,002	-7,698
https://www.facebook.com/565225540184937/posts/4701554396552010	111,721	106,394	-5,327
https://www.facebook.com/191347651290/posts/10159882288296291	100,826	100,073	-753
https://www.facebook.com/565225540184937/posts/4297534323620688	102,823	98,381	-4,442
https://www.facebook.com/100044504436603/posts/422583202568491	98,480	97,437	-1,043
https://www.facebook.com/100044504436603/posts/422473945912750	92,885	91,531	-1,354
https://www.facebook.com/565225540184937/posts/3859279670779491	102,851	91,330	-11,521
https://www.facebook.com/565225540184937/posts/4373551659352287	92,718	88,538	-4,180
https://www.facebook.com/1453950118203438/posts/2839802882951481	75,862	74,443	-1,419
https://www.facebook.com/565225540184937/posts/4852679111439537	87,054	80,910	-6,144
https://www.facebook.com/678954262167350/posts/3087523274643758	86,121	80,597	-5,524
https://www.facebook.com/565225540184937/posts/4958068254233955	83,373	79,428	-3,945
https://www.facebook.com/565225540184937/posts/6848273081880120	79,891	78,381	-1,510
https://www.facebook.com/678954262167350/posts/3089787037750715	84,621	78,835	-5,786
https://www.facebook.com/565225540184937/posts/4688474341193349	80,732	76,683	-4,049

Notes

- 1 See Samantha Hoffman, Matthew Knight, *China's messaging on the Ukraine conflict*, ASPI, Canberra, 23 May 2022, [online](#).
- 2 Julian E Barnes, Helene Cooper, 'US battles Putin by disclosing his next possible moves', *New York Times*, 12 February 2022, [online](#).
- 3 Marise Payne, 'Further sanctions on Russia', media statement, 8 March 2022, [online](#).
- 4 'Treasury sanctions Russians bankrolling Putin and Russia-backed influence actors', media release, US Department of the Treasury, 3 March 2022, [online](#).
- 5 Joel Gunter, 'China committed genocide against Uyghurs, independent tribunal rules', *BBC News*, [online](#). See ASPI research on the Chinese Government's systematic efforts to reduce the size of the indigenous population of Xinjiang through a range of coercive birth-control policies: Nathan Ruser, James Leibold, *Family de-planning: the coercive campaign to drive down indigenous birth-rates in Xinjiang*, ASPI, Canberra, [online](#).
- 6 See ASPI's Xinjiang Data Project, [online](#); 'Break their lineage, break their roots: China's crimes against humanity targeting Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims', *Human Rights Watch*, 19 April 2021, [online](#); Darren Byler, 'In the camps: China's high-tech penal colony', *Columbia University Global Reports*, 12 October 2021.
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Acronyms and abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
API	application programming interface
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
ETIM	East Turkestan Islamic Movement
EU	European Union
GDELT	Global Database of Events, Language and Tone
NSSF	National Social Science Fund
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
PRC	People's Republic of China
UN	United Nations
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council



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