



NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL

MEMORANDUM

ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS

16 October 2020

NICM 2020-09381

██████████ Making the Case That China Has Taken Some Steps to Influence the Presidential Election

██████████ *Scope Note:* This memorandum was prepared by the National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for Cyber and the Director, Election Threat Analysis (D/ETA). It offers an alternative perspective to the IC's assessment that China has not attempted to influence the outcome of the 2020 Presidential election. It was provided to the IC for comment before publication but is not an IC-coordinated memorandum.

██████████ The NIO for Cyber and the Director for Election Threat Analysis (D/ETA) assess that Beijing has taken at least some low-level, exploratory steps to undermine the President's reelection chances by denigrating him and shaping voter perceptions. Their assessment differs from the IC's judgment that Beijing has considered but not deployed influence efforts to affect the Presidential election.

- ██████████ The NIO and D/ETA assess that Beijing's efforts probably have included overt messaging, nascent online covert influence capabilities, diplomatic measures, and the use of economic leverage.
- ██████████ They assess that these efforts probably have not included the use of Beijing's most aggressive options for influencing or interfering in the election, ██████████ because ██████████ Beijing wants to minimize the risk of blowback and hopes to stabilize the relationship after the election.
- ██████████ The NIO and D/ETA have low-to-medium confidence in these assessments

because ██████████
██████████ much of the available reporting would be consistent with either the mainline or alternative view.

(U) IC Mainline Judgments

██████████ The IC, including the NIO for East Asia and other NIC officers, assesses Beijing has not deployed influence efforts intended to change the outcome of the US Presidential election. ██████████

██████████ that Chinese leaders desire stability in the US-China relationship and believe they have a range of tools that can achieve their goals regardless of who wins the election. The IC also assesses ██████████

██████████ that the election of either candidate will present opportunities and challenges for China probably informs their risk calculus against influencing the election. The IC assesses that Beijing prefers to respond to US actions with restraint to show resolve and preserve the ability to repair relations after the election.

• ██████████

(U) This memorandum was prepared by the National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for Cyber and the Director, Election Threat Analysis.
Questions may be directed to the NIO ██████████

Classified By: ██████████ | Derived From: ██████████ | Declassify On: ██████████

- In 2019, [REDACTED] assessed that "hostile forces" could fabricate claims that Beijing was interfering in the election to demonize China and that no matter who won the election Washington's hardline policies against Beijing were unlikely to change, [REDACTED] Chinese [REDACTED] noted that Beijing should avoid giving Washington any pretext to "scapegoat" China and to claim that it was interfering in the election, [REDACTED] In 2020 [REDACTED] also assessed, despite the President's attempts to blame China to divert attention from the pandemic and his electoral prospects, that managing tensions without causing irreparable damage to bilateral relations over the next six months remained in China's interest, [REDACTED]

- Chinese leaders may have decided that there is little point to taking the risk of an influence effort because they believe their preferred outcome is probable. As early as [REDACTED] this year, Chinese [REDACTED] assessed that the pandemic and economic downturn had diminished the President's reelection prospects and since then Beijing has been planning for either electoral outcome and conducting outreach to both candidates and their campaigns, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The IC has seen no indication [REDACTED] that Beijing is engaged in an effort to influence the outcome of the presidential election, nor has it observed activity that it assesses is likely the result of such an effort by Beijing. While we have seen Beijing develop [REDACTED] other options that could be used to influence the election, we have not seen these capabilities deployed.

- [REDACTED] claimed that China had not interfered with the US election and recommended that China speak and act circumspectly when faced with US assertions about Chinese and Russian interference, [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] in 2019— [REDACTED] to prevent the US President's reelection by suppressing his base, [REDACTED]

(U) An Alternative Perspective: Indicators of Influence Efforts

[REDACTED] The NIO and D/ETA agree with the large majority of the IC's judgments about China's calculus and approach to the election. They assess, however, that the IC's judgment that no element of the Chinese Government has taken any steps to influence the Presidential election [REDACTED] at least through the summer. They also have less confidence than the rest of the IC that China's preparations for [REDACTED] influence efforts were not carried out [REDACTED] given contradictory reporting [REDACTED]



[REDACTED] The NIO and D/ETA assess [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] over the summer [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] private sector and open source reporting on influence activities already underway suggest that the Chinese Government has been engaging in at least some level of influence targeting US voters and candidates with the knowledge that their activities could have an effect on the election outcome.

- [REDACTED] Beijing began taking unspecified steps around [REDACTED] 2020 to damage the US President's reelection campaign in response to US pressure on China's [REDACTED] technology sector, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] planning discussions among [REDACTED] [REDACTED] officials to respond to US pressure were taking place at increased frequency, and that senior leaders expected China's semiconductor industry would continue to be damaged if the US President were reelected. Unspecified Chinese Government officials [REDACTED] [REDACTED] that [REDACTED] Chinese [REDACTED] expected relief from sanctions if as a result of their efforts, US resolve weakened or a candidate from a named US political party were elected instead of the President being reelected.

- [REDACTED] [REDACTED] 2020, the [REDACTED] recommended that China collect derogatory "black materials" on the US President, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] official which the [REDACTED] recommended China "sensationalize" at the appropriate time. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

• (U//[REDACTED]) **IC Terminology:**

Election influence includes overt and covert influence activities of foreign governments or actors serving as agents of, or on behalf of, foreign governments intended to affect directly or indirectly a US election—including candidates, political parties, voters or their preferences, or political processes. **Election interference** is a subset of election influence targeted at the technical aspects of the election, including voter registration, casting and counting of ballots, and reporting of results.

- [REDACTED] The NIO and D/ETA assess that China [REDACTED] intend to at least indirectly affect US candidates, voters' preferences, and political processes, thus meeting the definition of election influence

- [REDACTED] [REDACTED] the Chinese Government had tasked its missions in the US to use Chinese groups and organizations to incite protests in the US to damage the President's public standing and undermine his reelection chances, [REDACTED]

- [REDACTED] The Chinese [REDACTED] had assessed [REDACTED] that racial conflict would be a large factor in the election, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] government-affiliated²¹ Chinese technology company employees were assisting [REDACTED] with a campaign, [REDACTED] to covertly incite violence and protests against the US Government.^{22,23}
- [REDACTED] Chinese [REDACTED] were experimenting [REDACTED] with the creation of deepfakes intended to denigrate President Trump in response to directives made by [REDACTED] to improve Beijing's ability to manipulate public opinion.²⁴

[REDACTED] During the same period, a pro-China influence network on US social media platforms posted messages supporting Beijing's views that included some English-language content denigrating the President and his Administration's policies. The activities of these networks are consistent with what we would expect to see from intelligence services or similar actors taking steps to build nascent online influence capabilities;²⁶ the NIO and D/ETA assess that their level of sophistication [REDACTED]

- [REDACTED] Although we cannot directly tie this network to the Chinese Government, the NIO and D/ETA assess that elements of the government were, at a minimum, aware of and

condoned the campaign, and may have directed or conducted it. We base this assessment on the alignment of the content with Beijing's overt messaging themes, its striking similarity to the themes and tactics of previous [REDACTED] Chinese influence campaigns that seek to blend their influence operations into broader public discourse, the duration and frequency of the activity spanning several months, the rapidity with which the network created videos in response to world events, and the network's consistent ability to operate outside China's Great Firewall.

- [REDACTED] [REDACTED] a US social media platform took down a separate cluster of unattributed pro-China accounts that defended a range of Chinese interests, but which also included accounts posing as Americans and posting some US election-focused content. The unidentified actors running these accounts created four groups—one favoring the President, two favoring his opponents, and one that primarily denigrated the President.²⁸ The accounts have since been shut down, but others could easily take their place and would be difficult to detect; [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] The IC assesses that since 2018, China has been researching methods and developing new tools for using online covert influence operations to sway the perspectives of American audiences. Chinese [REDACTED] planned [REDACTED] a report [REDACTED] on the potential impact their covert influence operations could have on the presidential election. [REDACTED]



[REDACTED]

These are developments that the IC has identified as increasing the likelihood that Beijing would seek to influence the election outcome.^c

China's Possible View of an Influence Campaign

The NIO and D/ETA assess that China may intend much of its broader messaging on issues in US-Chinese relations to also undermine the President's reelection prospects. China probably views as low-risk broad campaigns that emphasize specific issues in the US-China relationship and use a mixture of public statements, diplomatic engagement, private messaging, targeting of campaign donors, and online covert efforts to influence US officials, firms, and the public to oppose the President.^d Beijing has authorized the conduct of increasingly aggressive overt and covert influence campaigns aimed at criticizing policies of the Administration while trying to avoid blame for interfering in a U.S. Presidential election.

- [REDACTED] China, starting in March, launched overt and covert influence efforts to shape the global public narrative regarding Beijing's response to COVID-19 and denigrate the Administration's pandemic response, including by spreading disinformation about the pandemic's origins and publicizing English-language cartoons denigrating the President's handling of the crisis, judging from

open source [REDACTED]

The NIO for Cyber and D/ETA assess that Chinese leaders believe these activities could impact the election.⁴⁵

- [REDACTED] In May, a newspaper owned by the Chinese Communist Party claimed that economic measures Beijing could take against supporters of legislation and lawsuits seeking compensation from China over the COVID-19 pandemic may affect US state and congressional races.⁴⁶ This was the first time the IC had observed Beijing issue a public warning that suggests it is willing to impose economic costs that could affect US elections, although in [REDACTED] 2019 [REDACTED] advised [REDACTED] to gain leverage over US policy by directing unspecified resources to political swing states [REDACTED]

- [REDACTED] To help resolve a border dispute with India in Beijing's favor, Chinese [REDACTED] planned to disseminate on US social media platforms [REDACTED] content" discrediting the President, [REDACTED]

^d The NIO and D/ETA note that in NICM 2019-113 the IC warned that, because China probably would use the same tactics to influence the election as it already uses to influence US policy, we might not detect such a pivot.

- [REDACTED] Beijing over at least the past year has stepped up its efforts to influence the views and policies of candidates for US political office, [REDACTED] by targeting their key advisors and financial donors, [REDACTED]. Chinese diplomats acknowledge the sensitivity of targeting donors and have sought to hide such activity from US authorities.⁵⁴

[REDACTED] Tempering the assessments of the NIO and D/ETA is the fact there is no reporting to suggest that China has engaged in some of the more aggressive measures available to it to influence the US election outcome, such as funneling large donations or trying to compromise voting infrastructure^c or interfere with mail-in ballots. There are also indications that some elements of state power, such as trade, are being used ambiguously. For

example, despite trade disputes, China continues to buy agricultural products as part of the Phase One trade deal which Beijing probably assesses will help the President's reelection bid as well as help stabilize the bilateral relationship. The apparent lack of a whole-of-government campaign to favor one side [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Comparing Judgments on Chinese Election Influence

The NIO for Cyber and the Director for Election Threat Analysis assess that Beijing has taken at least some low-level, exploratory steps to try to undermine the President's reelection chances by denigrating him and shaping voter perceptions

ahead of the election. Their assessment differs from the IC's consensus judgments primarily in confidence levels and on whether Beijing has deployed influence efforts to try to affect the outcome of the Presidential election.

✓ Yes ✗ No

China has...	IC JUDGMENT	MINORITY ASSESSMENT
...Broad influence efforts in the United States (diplomatic, business, media)	✓	✓
...Probable preference for Trump's defeat	✓	✓
...Considered an influence effort aimed at the Presidential election	✓	✓
...Prepared options for influence effort in Presidential election	✓	✓
...Concerns about risk versus gain in any influence effort, particularly blowback if discovered	✓	✓
...Prepared for victory by either Trump or Biden	✓	✓
...Avoided a whole-of-government influence effort and any interference with US election systems	✓	✓
...Intends public and diplomatic actions to undercut Trump in election	✗	✓
...Undertaken a few covert influence efforts to undermine Trump's reelection	✗	✓

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