

WEEK 52, 2022

THE EPOCH TIMES

CHINA INSIDER

CHINA'S COVID CRISIS

DEATHS SOAR AS
CCP CONCEALS
VIRUS FIGURES

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Hearses wait
to enter a
crematorium in
Beijing on Dec.
22, 2022.

‘Whether You Live or Die, No One Cares’

Chinese Left Helpless Amid COVID Crisis

Health system, crematoriums overwhelmed; death toll rising among CCP elites

EVA FU

Inside the mortuary of a top hospital in China's fifth-most populous city of Guangzhou, dead bodies have been piled on the floor since the refrigerated chambers reached capacity. Elsewhere, long lines of cars waiting with bodies to be cremated have formed outside several morgues in the southwestern municipality of Chongqing.

Up north in China's capital, there were so many corpses that cold stores at state-run food companies have been turned into temporary storage facilities for dead bodies.

The grim scenes emanating out of China in recent days, which were shared by witnesses who spoke to The Epoch Times, are reminiscent of the desperation from nearly three years ago, when COVID-19 first erupted in the country. As the rest of the world learned to live with the virus, the regime held steady to its communist-style campaign known as “zero-COVID,” which aimed to eradicate the disease through a mix of massive lockdowns, intrusive surveillance, and mandatory testing—despite the heavy economic, humanitarian, and psychological toll.

Then, following nationwide unrest in November, the regime abruptly made a U-turn, relaxing the zero-COVID policy in early December. The reversal was made without forewarning or the announcement of measures for a graduated retreat from the policy.

Since then, the virus has ripped through the vast population, who have been ill-prepared for its sudden surge and, after nearly three years of zero-COVID restrictions, lack natural immunity to weather the outbreak.

The country is now in crisis with its health systems and frontline services overrun and overwhelmed. Judiciary and law enforcement facilities have shuttered due to widespread infections. Pharmacy shelves have been stripped bare. Hospitals, which are stretched and vastly understaffed, have tried to hire back retired workers in their efforts to keep up with the influx of COVID patients.

The devastation has continued to unfold despite Beijing's assurance on Dec. 27 that it's “fighting a prepared battle.”

“The Chinese Communist Party is all about politics,” Chinese historian Li Yuanhua, who lives in Australia, told The Epoch Times. “It never cares about people's livelihood.”

“What the regime is doing now, he said, is to quickly achieve herd immunity through mass infections, so that the country can revive its faltering economy.

Chaos
At the Zengcheng Funeral Home in the southern port city Guangzhou, workers have been receiving bodies nonstop, 24 hours a day.

“We got 90 today,” an employee told The Epoch Times on Dec. 22 on the condition of anonymity, adding that four other morgues in the city are similarly inundated. The facility has run out of vehicles for transporting corpses, the worker said.



Hearses are seen waiting to enter a crematorium in Beijing on Dec. 22, 2022.

COVID IN CHINA



COVID-19 patients resting at the Second Affiliated Hospital of Chongqing Medical University in China's southwestern city of Chongqing on Dec. 23, 2022.

“We can't take more at this point,” a worker from a nearby crematorium told The Epoch Times. From burners to vans to storage rooms, all were running at maximum capacity, the worker said; the bodies have filled more than 200 morgue freezers.

What they said matched a pattern repeated across the nation.

In Chongqing's state-owned Shiqiaopu Funeral House, where videos have captured long queues outside the facility, the increased workload has forced a cancellation of mourning services. A resident who lives nearby, surnamed Li, told The Epoch Times that the facility has been hiring temporary staff at a cost of up to 500 yuan (\$72) each day, about three times the average daily pay of a white-collar worker.

“You hear coughing everywhere,” Li said in an interview. Because of the large number of bus drivers falling sick, she said, buses that usually come every five minutes now can take an hour to arrive.

A crematorium in Yuanshi county of northern China was so strained that three of its incinerators malfunctioned, according to a notice photographed and shared on Chinese social media.

The Second Affiliated Hospital of Guangzhou Medical University typically sees 40 to 50 patients dying each month, but on Dec. 23 alone, there were 22 deaths, according to a worker, who stated her surname as Liang.

“It's scary,” she told The Epoch Times. Multiple staffers handling the bodies have become ill with the virus, and Liang, who frequently interacts with them, started feeling cold on Dec. 23, she told The Epoch Times in a phone interview on the same day.

“Doctors still have to work even if they test positive, unless they are seriously ill,” she said. “Positive cases are everywhere. At least in our hospital, more than 70 percent are COVID-positive by now.”

The Chinese Communist Party is all about politics. It never cares about people's livelihood.

Li Yuanhua, historian

The crushing pressure caused a hospital director in east China's Zhejiang Province to post a thousand-word letter to staff on Dec. 25—which was the second day it received more than 1,000 fever patients—asking them to be prepared for a higher workload to come. By then, 1,400 employees at the hospital had become infected, according to Chinese media reports.

Virus Numbers Concealed

Just as they did in the early days of the pandemic, the officials have made it a challenge to assess the true picture of the worsening outbreak. By the regime's account, only eight people have died from the disease since its lifting of COVID curbs in early December. This figure is based on the regime's recently narrowed definition of a COVID death, which excludes all but those who die from respiratory failure and pneumonia directly associated with a COVID infection, a calculation method unseen elsewhere in the world.

The numbers depart sharply from a leaked memo from a recent high-level meeting of health officials, which estimated that 248 million people likely contracted the virus in the first 20 days of December.

Further corroborating the memo, Yu Xinle, the deputy director at the Zhejiang Health Commission, said on Dec. 25 that the daily cases in the province topped 1 million, a number that he expects will double around New Year's Day.

The country's top health body has stopped publishing daily virus counts since the leaking of the meeting minutes.

The tally was not the focus of the first remarks Chinese leader Xi Jinping made since the regime's reversal of zero-COVID. On Dec. 26, he described a “new situation and new task” for COVID outbreak containment, which, he said, calls for more “targeted patriotic health campaigns.”

“Three years through the outbreak and they suddenly let the floodgates open,” a resident from Wuhan, the Chinese city where the pandemic emerged in 2019, told NTD, a sister media of The Epoch Times.

“Whether you live or die, no one cares. But the regular people know well that a lot of people have died.”

Rise in Deaths of CCP Elites

The latest COVID surge has also seen a rise in deaths among officials, experts, and figures closely aligned with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Obituaries have littered state-run media in recent weeks, including for Zhou Zhichun, former deputy chief editor and vice president of the state-owned China Youth Daily; politician Zhu Zhihong, who once chaired the Jiangxi Provincial Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference; 39-year-old Peking Opera actress Chu Lanlan; Marxist economist Hu Jun; former National Sports Commission vice director Liu Ji; the designer of the mascots from the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Wu Guanying; as well as dozens of illustrious professors at two of China's most prestigious academic institutions, Peking University and Tsinghua University.

Almost none of the obituaries listed the cause of death.

Tang Weiguo, former chairman of the board at Shanghai Kehua Bio-Engineering Co., China's largest manufacturer of medical diagnostic kits and a COVID testing kit supplier, died on Dec. 25 at the age of 66. The company attributed his death to a complication of underlying disease from COVID-19.

Heng He, a China affairs analyst, believes that the number of Chinese elites affected by the current COVID outbreak is notable, and suggests a metaphysical factor behind the trend.

Many of them have been the core players in the regime's power structure and committed themselves to be propagandists burnishing the CCP's image.

“Maybe you think it isn't a big deal, but the CCP is a crime syndicate,” he told The Epoch Times, adding that the recent uptick

in cases should make people reconsider their ties with the regime. “Tying one's life with the fate of the Party will not bring you any good.”

“The idea that “you reap what you sow,” he said, has been deeply rooted in Chinese minds since antiquity.

“A popular belief in China is that good deeds will meet with good returns and vice versa, and that you could see retribution within one's lifetime,” he said.

“In a sense, one might consider this karmic retribution.”

‘Fighting With Heaven’

The concept of “fighting,” repeatedly used in CCP rhetoric describing its anti-COVID campaigns, has been embedded in Chinese communist ideology since the Party's inception, observers note.

“Battling with heaven is endless joy, fighting with the earth is endless joy, and struggling with humanity is endless joy,” Mao Zedong, a founding member of the Party and the first regime leader once claimed.

Sean Lin, a former lab director at the viral disease branch of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, sees the regime's pledge to eliminate the virus as a show of its extremism.

While diseases fade, history shows that the viruses are never truly gone. In comparison with other countries that reopened over the summer after determining the low public health risk posed by the Omicron variant, the new COVID measures in China are political, Lin said.

Peng Dingding, a political commentator in Beijing, echoed Lin's view.

“Throughout the entire outbreak prevention process, the Chinese government hasn't done one thing right,” he told The Epoch Times. “Even after three years of pandemic and building so many makeshift hospitals, there's still not enough capacity to treat patients. I really can't understand what this country is doing.”

It's a show of the “arrogance and ignorance of the highest Chinese leadership,” he added.

“In the fight against heaven, they have failed. In the fight against the earth, they have failed. All they know is to fight with people,” Peng said.

“He always thinks himself to be all-powerful,” he added, referring to Xi.

Luo Ya, Gu Xiaohua, and Yi Ru contributed to this report.



Ambulance drivers unload a patient outside a clinic treating COVID-19 patients in Beijing on Dec. 21, 2022.

COVID IN CHINA

Deaths Among CCP Elites Rise as COVID-19 Wave Hits China

EVA FU

It started with a high fever, a telltale sign of COVID-19, that soon led to a positive test result. Yang Lianghua, formerly a senior reporter for the Chinese communist regime's official mouthpiece People's Daily and the chief editor of the newspaper's international edition, then had to wait in the emergency room for a bed in Beijing's top hospital, which was already beyond packed.

With intervention from the state media's senior executives and the hospital director, Yang was eventually admitted to the intensive care unit, where he died hours later. The cause of his death was a bacterial lung infection.

Yang was one of a long list of prominent figures tied to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) who died amid a surge in Omicron sweeping China, after the regime abruptly loosened its years-long draconian COVID-19 restrictions that had shuttered businesses, crippled China's economy, and made it a challenge for the Chinese population to sustain their basic lives.

The abrupt U-turn in direction, however, was made without the provision of resources and policies to help the populace deal with the mounting cases of infections.

The country's health system has been ill-prepared. As the virus spread across households, chaos has erupted in hospitals and crematoriums, and even Chinese elites, known for the privileges they enjoy, haven't been immune from the whirlpash.

In addition to Yang, those who've died over the past few weeks include Zhou Zhichun, former deputy chief editor and vice president for the state-owned China Youth Daily; politician Zhu Zhihong, who once chaired the Jiangxi Provincial Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference; 39-year-old Peking Opera actress Chu Lanlan; Marxist economist Hu Jun; former National Sports Commission vice director Liu Ji; the designer of the mascots from the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Wu Guanying; as well as dozens of illustrious professors at two of China's most prestigious academic institutions, Peking University and Tsinghua University.

About a dozen leading health experts have also died, including Nan Dengkun, who is credited with having pioneered China's medical rehabilitation industry, and top pharmaceutical scientist Wei Shuli.

Official Figures a Vast Understatement

Despite the uptick in obituaries of prominent individuals appearing on state media outlets, few details were mentioned about their causes of death.

The Chinese regime has turned to its well-worn playbook of vastly understating COVID infection and death figures in a bid to tamp down the news that tarnishes the CCP's image. The National Health Commis-

sion has so far counted only a handful of COVID deaths—eight over a span of three weeks. Only patients dying of COVID-induced pneumonia and respiratory failure are included in this figure. Those with underlying conditions don't count.

But accounts on the ground present a far grimmer picture.

Funeral parlors across the country are running around the clock to burn bodies, and health authorities are encouraging medics who retired over the past five years to rejoin the workforce to ease the staff shortage. Many medical staff on duty are sick themselves with COVID. A top Beijing hospital surgeon told Chinese media that around 70 percent of health workers at his unit were sick, including himself, but that he had to keep working.

London-based health research firm Airfinity estimated that more than 5,000 people are likely dying each day from COVID-19, based on modeling from regional Chinese data.

That concept was illustrated in a March 2020 article by Mr. Li Hongzhi, the founder of the spiritual discipline Falun Gong.

“But a pandemic like the current Chinese Communist Virus (or ‘Wuhan Virus’) comes with a purpose behind it, and it has targets. It is here to weed out members of the Party and those who have sided with it,” Mr. Li wrote.

“If anyone is in doubt about this, just take a look at which countries or people have been hit hardest by the virus: it is those who have become close with the CCP. Then what should people do? People should distance themselves from the CCP and stop siding with the Party.”

Elites Left Defenseless

The upper echelon of the CCP, who've largely shielded themselves from the damaging effects of lockdowns over the past few years, have found themselves suddenly vulnerable in the latest wave.

An account on China's microblogging site Weibo that's been identified as belonging to the wife of Zhao Lijian, the foreign ministry spokesman who's notorious for hawkish rhetoric and spreading virus disinformation—including the falsehood that the virus was brought into Wuhan by the U.S. Army—recently complained that she hasn't been able to secure any antiviral drugs, anti-inflammatory drugs, or cold medicine.

“How many days will you be feverish until you recover?” she wrote, without identifying who she was referring to, according to a screenshot of a deleted post. “Where did all these drugs go?”

She later added that they were using popsticks to lower body temperature. Nationalist economist Hu Angang, director of the Center for China Studies, who advises the communist leadership, recently lost his father-in-law to pneumonia induced by COVID-19. The family couldn't reach the medical hotline for an hour, and then had to wait for hours for the ambulance, according to a widely cited post from Mei Xinyu, a senior analyst at the International Trade and Economic Cooperation Institute at China's Ministry of Commerce.

“The old gentleman is a senior Party member who has received medals from the country, but can only wait for cremation in the hospital morgue,” Mei wrote on Dec. 21, adding that the Beijing Babaoshan Funeral Home, where his body will be sent, cremates about 200 to 300 bodies each day. “There's no spot today.”

“That's why Chinese people always warn against aiding anyone in a wrongful act—especially the persecution of faiths.”

Heng was pointing to the regime's brutal suppression campaigns targeting Falun Gong and other beliefs.

“In a sense, one might consider this karmic retribution,” he said.

“A popular belief in China is that

CCP INFLUENCE

'Mind Dominance'

The CCP's Disinformation War on US Social Media

ANDREW THORNEBROOKE

Clusters of new social media profiles emerge and interact with long-dormant accounts, seemingly exchanging viewpoints from across the American political spectrum.

Some sport American flags for profile pictures; others have images of beautiful women. Almost all are anonymous, though some impersonate real people.

In tweets and posts and messages they spread their views. Some stridently defend a woman's right to have an abortion, others the right to life. Some defend the second amendment, others vehemently champion Black Lives Matter. Some claim that the United States is descending into a leftist tyranny. Still more say it's headed toward fascism.

Above all, they post memes disparaging the United States' political parties and governmental institutions. Here one finds a meme of President Joe Biden with a caption excoriating the Build Back Better slogan. Here one finds a meme of Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) insinuating that the lawmaker has financial ties with Putin's Russia.

It would be easy to conclude that these clusters of accounts are a perfect representation of the political polarization that has seized the United States in recent years. But it would be wrong.

None of these accounts are operated by Americans.

They are part of a wide-reaching series of interconnected influence operations conducted for the benefit of China's communist regime, and they are just the tip of the iceberg.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which rules China as a single-party state, is increasingly manipulating what Americans see and believe by sowing discord and rancor on social media. Such influence operations, far from being mere propaganda, are deployed in the pursuit of the CCP's greater strategic ambition of undermining and displacing the United States as leader of the international order.

To be sure, the CCP's ambition of replacing the democratic West with a Sino-centric authoritarianism is not new. But the methods that the regime is employing in its overseas influence operations are.

According to the testimony of security experts, lawmakers, and numerous reports, the CCP is adapting its strategy for psychological warfare against the weaknesses of open societies, and it is evolving its influence campaigns from corny propaganda about the glory of communism into subtler, more insidious disinformation campaigns intended to make Americans give up on their own country.

Rubio, who was himself the subject of a meme in one such influence operation, said that the effort was inextricably linked to the regime's desire to undermine and destroy the United States.

"The Chinese Communist Party is laser-focused on undermining and, ultimately, overthrowing the United States," the Florida senator told Epoch Times in an email. "It is working overtime to dominate and influence Americans in academia, technology, as well as local and federal government."

"The United States must not be naïve to this threat, and it starts by recognizing and banning the companies, organizations, and software the CCP uses to influence Americans."

China's War on the American Mind

To understand why the CCP is exploiting social media to sow division among the American public, it is necessary to understand what the regime believes its influence operations are striving toward.

The Pentagon's 2022 China Military Power Report, which distills the Defense Department's most authoritative assessments of China's strategy and capabilities, highlights the development of a new method of psychological warfare emerging amongst the regime's politico-military leadership.

The report says that the CCP's military wing, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), is expanding and evolving its methods for conducting war on the mind in an effort to win real military advantage.

"As the PLA seeks to expand the reach of its influence operations around the world and to seize information dominance on the battlefield, it is researching and developing the next evolution of psychological warfare called cognitive

The goal of CDO [cognitive domain operations] is to achieve what the PLA refers to as 'mind dominance,' defined as the use of propaganda as a weapon to influence public opinion to effect change in a nation's social system, likely to create an environment favorable to China.

Pentagon report

The 2022 Record Future report found that the CCP's deployment of "precise communication," a means of conducting influence operations based on targeted audiences, required an extraordinary amount of in-depth data organized at the level of individuals, communities, and nations, and further tailored to account for culture, economics, religion, and personal interests, among other factors.

domain operation[s] (CDO) that leverages subliminal messaging, deep fakes, overt propaganda, and public sentiment analysis," the report stated.

The report describes CDO as "a more aggressive form of psychological warfare" intended to "affect a target's cognition, decision making, and behavior."

In short, CDO is the regime's new methodology for breaking the will of an adversary, or else manipulating them into behaving in a manner more in accordance with the regime's desires.

"The goal of CDO is to achieve what the PLA refers to as 'mind dominance,' defined as the use of propaganda as a weapon to influence public opinion to effect change in a nation's social system, likely to create an environment favorable to China and reduce civilian and military resistance to PLA actions," the report said.

"PLA articles on CDO state that seizing mind dominance in the cognitive domain and subduing the enemy without fighting is the highest realm of warfare."

The reason why the CCP is turning Americans against one another by inflaming polarization is simple enough then: A nation at war with itself is hardly capable of fighting against communist China.

Sam Kessler, a geopolitical advisor with risk management firm North Star Support Group, said that the CCP's new influence operations ought then to be considered within the broader context of its military doctrines and strategies.

Foremost among them is the regime's doctrine of "Unrestricted Warfare," through which the CCP commits all aspects of society to achieve victory, as well as its strategy leveraging the "Three Warfares" of legal, media, and psychological war.

"[The CCP] are implementing a cognitive and asymmetrical war, which are subversive operations aimed at causing fear, confusion, disruption, and polarization within American society as well as in other targeted countries," Kessler said.

"The goal is to weaken the foundation of a society and its institutions by em-

ploying a long game type of strategy that usually targets unsuspecting individuals and groups," Kessler said.

"This can be implemented to cause distrust in American institutions ... Once these things become tainted and eroded in the long term, it is usually very difficult to repair them. As a result, history has shown these methods [are] highly effective in causing societal collapse if not just chaos when allowed to happen over a long period of time."

Perhaps nowhere is this ambition more clear than in the case of "DRAGON-BRIDGE," a recently discovered malign influence operation conducted in support of the CCP and its goals.

Intelligence firm Mandiant, which uncovered the ongoing operation, found that the campaign seeks to aggressively undermine U.S. interests by discouraging Americans from voting, inflaming political tensions, and claiming that the United States is covertly responsible for what is actually CCP aggression.

The DRAGONBRIDGE operation does this by impersonating legitimate groups, plagiarizing and altering news articles, and posing as U.S. citizens eager to criticize the United States' record on race and social justice issues.

According to Kessler, such efforts are part and parcel of the regime's strategy for weakening the United States from the inside.

"In many ways, cognitive warfare is more effective in draining a society's ability to be ready to respond when there's more confusion, poor morale, and depleted mental stamina," Kessler said.

"After all, if the internal backbone of a society is weakened, wearied, and mentally exhausted through these targeted influence campaigns, then it is more susceptible to being manipulated and controlled by foreign adversaries like China, Russia, and Iran."

CCP Influence Ops Increasing in Frequency and Sophistication

It was unclear in previous years if the regime would take direct action against that backbone. The regime has historically targeted members of the Chinese diaspora with pro-communist propaganda, and there is a steep learning curve from such operations to more broadly sowing political enmity among American citizens en masse.

That has changed, however. In a matter of only three or four years, the regime and its sponsored actors appear to have doubled down on creating chaos interna-

tionally, as is documented across several reports published by intelligence firm Recorded Future.

One 2019 report, for example, found that from 2016 to 2019, CCP influence operations fundamentally differed from those of other adversarial nations such as Russia.

Russia's operations rely on bot networks and "troll farms" that operate in coordinated online influence campaigns aimed at destabilizing target nations by increasing intranational strife. Such campaigns create distrust and confusion among voters in democratic societies, and thereby erode the society's capacity to respond to more overt threats from the nation directing the influence operation.

Prior to 2019, the CCP largely exploited the United States' open media environment to promote positive views of China and communism. Its state-backed influencers used paid advertising and bot networks to earn favorable views abroad.

By 2022, however, another report found that the CCP had successfully pivoted to into a new phase of influence operations, marked by the targeted messaging of well-defined audiences that were segmented based on granular demographic data, not unlike that used by global marketing and research agencies.

"2019 marked a turning point in China's use of online disinformation, with foreign-facing computational propaganda increasing rapidly," the report stated.

"In the post-2019 period, inauthentic campaigns and online personalities have become staples of CCP propaganda. YouTube, Facebook, and other global social media platforms have removed tens of thousands of accounts suspected of inauthentic manipulation attributed to China in the past three years."

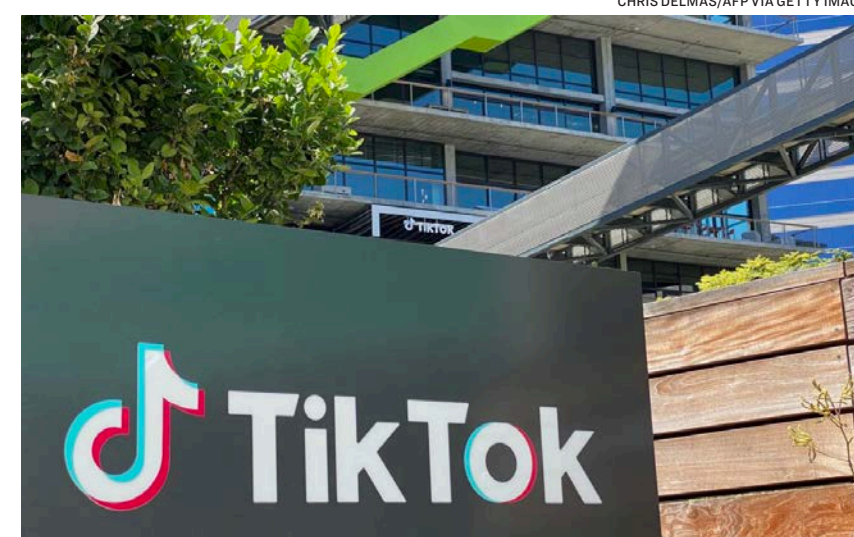
These new accounts, according to Recorded Future, likely receive guidance or material support from the CCP's United Front Work Department, a powerful agency charged with overseeing global influence operations, and the regime's top intelligence agency, the Ministry of State Security.

What's more, the swift evolution in tactics and strategy could indicate that the regime is learning to conduct psychological warfare from a more senior partner like Russia, whose own cyber tactics the new Chinese methods closely resemble. "China and Russia have forged a very close partnership that has greatly evolved during the last three decades," Kessler said. "It's very possible that we'll witness a formalized strategic alliance between China and Russia to counter the U.S. and the West more directly at some point in our lives, if it hasn't occurred already."

"As a result, Beijing and Moscow have improved their defense and security ties in addition to other things like economics, infrastructure, energy, and natural resources. This especially includes cyber partnerships between China and Russia in terms of cooperation and coordination regarding information security and operations between the two."



A young man in a cyber cafe sits at a computer.



The logo of Chinese video app TikTok at its C3 campus in Culver City in Los Angeles on Aug. 11, 2020.

Data at the Heart of CCP Influence Campaigns

Given the regime's newfound focus on cognitive domain operations and its increasingly strident behavior in attempting to undermine the interests of the United States, Americans may rightly wonder what it is that powers China's disinformation machine.

The answer is data. Indeed, the regime is leveraging vast troves of data on American citizens every single day as part of its effort to disrupt the United States from within.

The 2022 Record Future report found that the CCP's deployment of "precise communication," a means of conducting influence operations based on targeted audiences, required an extraordinary amount of in-depth data organized at the level of individuals, communities, and nations, and further tailored to account for culture, economics, religion, and personal interests, among other factors.

"China's implementation of this strategy requires an in-depth understanding of target audiences, which is being attained—with the aid of international firms—through area studies research, in-country surveys, and online behavioral data," the report said.

In many ways, cognitive warfare is more effective in draining a society's ability to be ready to respond when there's more confusion, poor morale, and depleted mental stamina.

Sam Kessler, geopolitical advisor, North Star Support Group

Moreover, the report said, the regime's propaganda arms were almost certainly clients of China Data Matrix, a China-based media monitoring company "that claims to have 'complete coverage' of Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, Line, and other major platforms, web portals, communities, forums, and blogs from over 100 countries and 10 languages."

It is perhaps unsurprising then that CCP laws categorize data as a national resource, subject to communist collectivization, and therefore mandate that all data stored in the country or by Chinese companies must be handed over to the Party upon request.

This need for data to fuel the regime's influence operations also makes the presence of Chinese-owned companies in the United States problematic.

The type of data that might be gleaned from social media giant TikTok through its China-based parent company ByteDance, for example, could be used to directly inform the construction of an influence campaign by communist authorities.

Rep. Michael McCaul (R-Texas), who will chair the House Foreign Affairs Committee when Republicans take majority in January, is acutely aware of the problem. He believes that the regime's ability to obtain the data of American users through companies like TikTok is a key part of the puzzle.

"Unfortunately, it is no surprise that the CCP is working to sow political discord among the American people," McCaul told The Epoch Times in an email. "The U.S. is failing to take the threat of the CCP seriously."

"ByteDance, a CCP-controlled company, operates the most popular social media network among American youth, and CCP entities are buying up our sensitive data. A Republican-led House is going to attack these threats head on."

Defending an Open Society Difficult, but Possible

The CCP seeks to shape the behavior of Americans to the detriment of the United States. It aims to do this by exploiting the openness of American society and U.S.-based social media platforms. The threat of domestic crisis stemming from influence operations is rising. Developments in recent months show that the CCP is gaining in its quest to polarize Americans and undermine the American political system.

In November, China-backed bots spammed Twitter taking over hash tags and blocking out regional searches in order to prevent users from seeing anti-lockdown protests occurring across China.

In October, a report found that TikTok failed to prevent 90 percent of election misinformation directed at Americans ahead of the 2022 midterms, including advertising that contained explicitly false information intended to prevent Americans from voting.

In September, Meta dismantled several China-based influence operations, the substance of which was described in the opening of this story.

China-based actors have tried to influence U.S. elections, attempted to undermine the U.S. stability by creating racial enmity, and attempted to discredit and even attack Chinese dissidents running for Congress.

According to another Recorded Future report published in October, such efforts will only increase in the years to come.

"China's state-sponsored influencers are almost certainly conducting malign influence operations targeting English and Chinese-speaking U.S. audiences with divisive political multimedia content on social media," the report stated.

All is not lost, however. According to Kessler, there is hope in transparency, and the ability of CCP agents to stir political vitriol and undermine U.S. national security lessens every time such an effort is made clear.

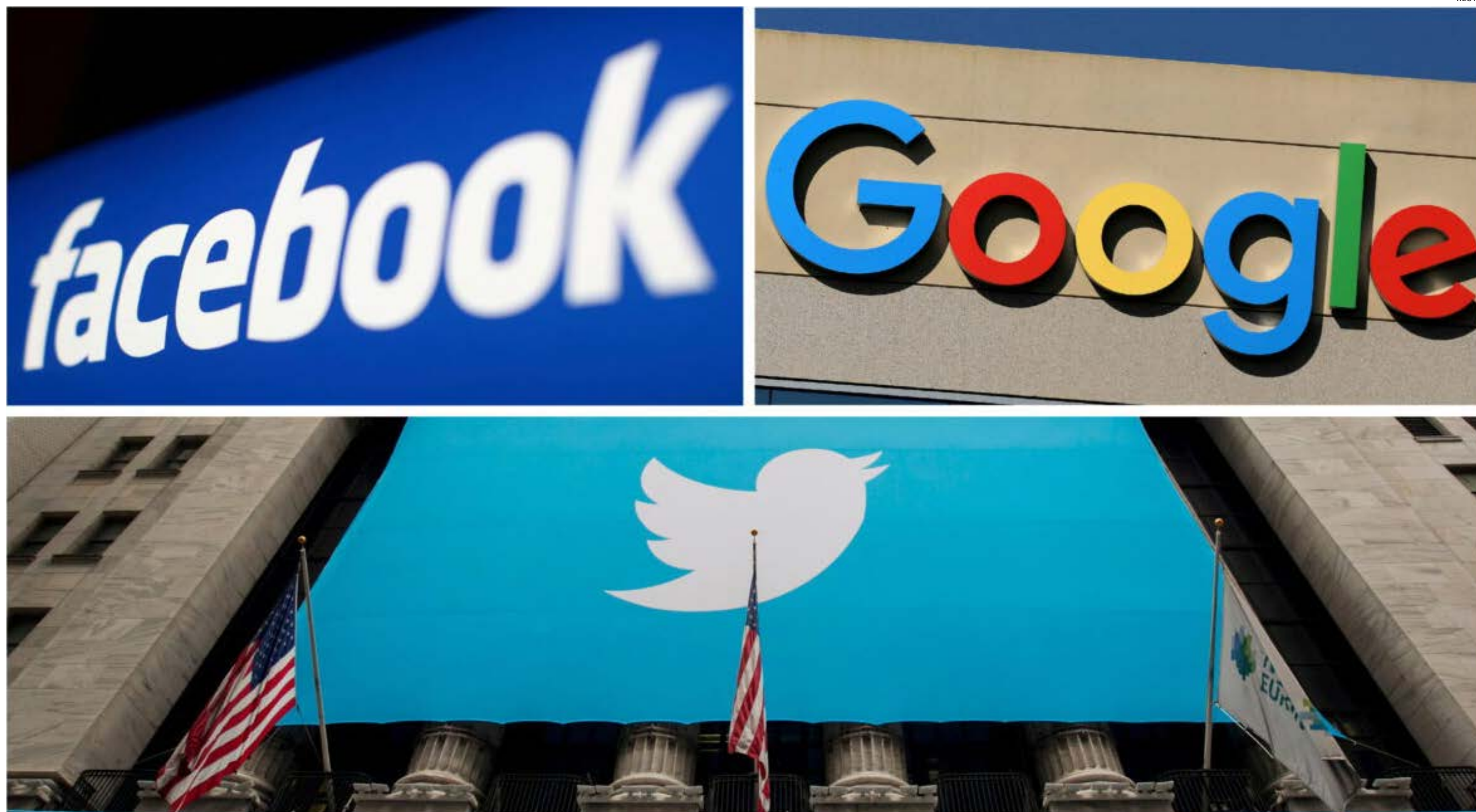
To that end, Kessler said that the future of TikTok was just one weather-vane one could use to tell which way the wind was blowing.

"Recently, there have been greater efforts to deter the level of influence that TikTok has on the American mediascape," Kessler said. "It will only continue to grow as more lawmakers, federal officials, and investigators associate TikTok with Chinese state media as well as being a tool of Chinese espionage."

"Treating it as a tool of espionage and subversive warfare will either eliminate TikTok from the American mediascape or at least completely reform it with algorithms that won't be designed at harming the social fabric of the country and its children."

[The CCP] is working overtime to dominate and influence Americans in academia, technology, as well as local and federal government.

Marco Rubio, senator, U.S. Senate



OPINION

Invading Taiwan

A Goal Xi Jinping Can Never Achieve

ZHANG TIANLIANG



After Xi Jinping secured a third term at the 20th National Congress in October, many people speculated about what he will do next. The most

worrying move is that he would invade Taiwan with arms.

Especially after the Russia-Ukraine war, the United States, the European Union, and think tanks in many countries have turned their attention to China, fearing that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will use this opportunity to launch a war against Taiwan.

Some China experts also warn that Xi's dream is to remain in power for life and, therefore, must establish what seems to be a significant historical feat for the CCP, which is the armed reunification of Taiwan. But we must look at four reasons why it is unrealistic for Xi to launch this war.

Technology

Although China is a major manufacturing country, it is not a manufacturing powerhouse. Almost all of the key technologies are in the hands of other countries.

For example, on April 16, 2018, the U.S. Department of Commerce announced a seven-year ban on U.S. companies selling parts to ZTE Corp., a Chinese telecommunications equipment manufacturer. ZTE's business immediately went into shock. According to a Voice of America report, Xi called then-President Donald Trump and asked if Trump could help get ZTE back in business.

Trump asked Xi what he was willing to pay. Xi said he would pay a \$500 million fine and remove the company's management and board of directors. Trump countered with \$1.5 billion. In addition, Trump wanted a high level of security assurance and that ZTE had to purchase a large number of U.S. components. After some bargaining, Xi cut Trump's \$1.5 billion fine to \$1.3 billion.

Another example is Huawei. The U.S. sanctions against the Chinese telecom giant have caused a sharp decline in its cell phone business. About 35 million units were sold in 2021, down 81.6 percent year-on-year.

We know that the CCP maintains stability through ubiquitous surveillance cameras, face recognition, big data collection, etc. It relies on computing power and storage; without chips, the CCP cannot control society. Thus, a high-tech embargo would directly endanger the CCP's regime.

Some may argue that during the Mao Zedong era, the CCP achieved tight social control without advanced technology. Moreover, why can North Korea gain total control over its population even though it is so poor?

We need to understand one thing—any ruling has a cost. The least costly form of ruling is the unconditional obedience of the people. In other words, a common phenomenon in communist countries is that the ruling regime makes the top leader look like a god. By making the leader a charismatic, all-knowing, god-like being who the people follow like crazy, it hardly costs much because the leader has already conquered the hearts of almost everyone. But China is not at all in a position to do that now.

Too many Chinese have given Xi all sorts of derogatory nicknames. Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu (which means "little red book," like what those Red Guards held during the Cultural Revolution under Mao) has leaked 564 sensitive Xi-related words that the CCP tries to censor, such as "Xi Baozi" ("Baozi" is a Chinese steamed bun) and "Xi Zhutou" ("Zhutou" means boar's head).

Thus, the CCP can only rely on external forces like high technology to maintain its rule. If Xi fights Taiwan, it could destroy his power.

Economy

If the CCP's rule relies heavily on high technology, which also costs money, the CCP cannot bring the economy down completely. In its annual budget, there is a big chunk called "stability maintenance expenses" to keep the repressive apparatus running, such as the salaries



Chinese leader Xi Jinping (C) is applauded by senior members of the government and delegates as he walks to the podium to make a speech during the opening ceremony of the 20th National Congress in Beijing on Oct. 16, 2022.

and equipment of the armed police, and the cost of the intelligence services, among other things.

Since 2011, the CCP's stability maintenance expenses have exceeded its military spending, which is equivalent to waging war against its own population every year. If the economy collapses, the stability maintenance system will cease to function because the armed police don't protect the CCP out of a sense of loyalty and mission, but to receive a paycheck.

If the CCP launches an invasion against Taiwan, the ensuing economic sanctions and the international community's cessation of trade with China will not only cause its economy to plummet, but will also make the people's lives unsustainable.

After the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, the CCP has been using the effectiveness of its ruling to appear legitimate; that is, this regime has not been legally authorized. But because the people's lives have been improving due to the reform and opening up policy and China's admittance to the World Trade Organization, they do not question why the CCP is the only ruling party. However, an economic downturn would turn the legitimacy of the CCP's rule into a prominent issue. That is why Xi can't afford to fight Taiwan.

Xi's Power Security

There are two other important reasons: Xi's power security and the high probability that he will lose the war.

An armed invasion of Taiwan would mean that Xi would have to hand over the most advanced weapons, as well as the command of the military. This is very dangerous for Xi because one wouldn't know where these soldiers will point their guns once they get their hands on the weapons.

It's widely known that the Tiananmen Square massacre happened on June 4,

1989. Deng Xiaoping used 300,000 field troops to suppress and attack students and citizens demanding democracy. In fact, there were not many students left in Tiananmen Square at that time. Deng only needed to mobilize 10,000 troops to finish the job, but why did he mobilize 300,000?

The reason was simple: Deng was unsure if the troops would carry out the order if he mobilized only 10,000 troops, or if they would even storm Zhongnanhai with the students. He had peace of mind when he mobilized 300,000 troops and divided them into different groups. In this case, because each group had no idea whether other troops would carry out orders, each commander would think that if he sided with the students, he would be surrounded and annihilated by other soldiers. In this way, the different armies acted as barrier troops for each other.

Deng was one of the founders of the CCP's army. During the civil war between the CCP and the Kuomintang, the CCP had four field armies, and Deng was the political commissar of the Second Field Army. In other words, with Deng's seniority and prestige in the military, he did not dare to just hand over his guns to the troops but had to consider the mutual constraints and balance between the armies.

In contrast, Xi, who has no prestige in the military, would be even more uneasy if he had to use more troops and give them more advanced weapons to attack Taiwan than Deng did in the 1989 Tiananmen massacre.

Even if an invasion of Taiwan succeeds, the generals who lead the troops gain enormous prestige. At the same time, with troops at their disposal, these people will have enough political power to replace Xi as the top leader. Such examples are common in Chinese history. Xi should be familiar with such history.

just as everyone in the West knows about Caesar's Crossing the Rubicon.

As Carl von Clausewitz puts it, "War is not merely a political act but a real political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, a carrying out of the same by other means."

Let us leave aside the question of whether Xi can agree to an armed invasion of Taiwan. If the result of winning the war is to create a political rival for Xi himself, what is the point of an armed unification of Taiwan?

Xi can't win the fight. This brings us to the fourth reason why he cannot unify Taiwan with the mainland by force. According to Bloomberg, the Center for Strategic and International Studies did a series of war games in August this year, showing that unless the United States does not intervene in the war and Japan remains neutral, the CCP cannot take over Taiwan.

These projections did not take into account the corruption of the CCP's military. After Xi came to power in 2012, he purged a large number of military generals, including Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission Adm. Guo Boxiong, Adm. Xu Caihou, and Logistics Minister Lt. Gen. Gu Junshan.

It's hard to imagine that corruption in the military would not affect its combat effectiveness and logistics. CCP commanders devote most of their energy to pleasing their superiors in order to advance their careers and gain wealth rather than mastering modern combat methods.

Even if Xi wants to turn a blind eye to these problems, officials at all levels of the military are aware of them. On Aug. 9, 2021, the South China Morning Post quoted a political insider as saying that the Chinese foreign and national defense ministries are fighting over the style of discourse. The defense ministry accused the foreign ministry of its "wolf warrior" diplomacy that angered democratic countries. The source also revealed that the fight between the foreign affairs and defense ministries accused each other in front of Xi.

If Xi's armed reunification of Taiwan is for a political purpose, is it possible that he will fight a war that he will surely lose? If losing the war will bring him down, then why doesn't he pretend to fight the war and rely on delaying tactics to extend his time in power?

Views expressed in this article are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.

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Aircraft of the eastern theater command of the Chinese People's Liberation Army conduct joint combat training exercises around Taiwan on Aug. 7, 2022.

REUTERS/THOMAS PETE



Security personnel keep watch outside the Wuhan Institute of Virology during the visit by the World Health Organization team tasked with investigating the origins of the CCP virus, in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, on Feb. 3, 2021.

COVID ORIGINS

China Had Biological Weapons Ambitions Long Before Pandemic: House Intelligence Committee Member

HANNAH NG & STEVE LANCE

China had made clear its biological weapons ambitions long before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Rep. Brad Wenstrup (R-Ohio), a member of the House Intelligence Committee.

Wenstrup together with Republicans on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI) released a report on the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic on Dec. 14.

"Our State Department has put things out over the past, even going back to 2005, that China is interested in offensive bioweapons," Wenstrup told the "Capitol Report" program on NTD, the sister media outlet of the Epoch Times, on Dec. 16.

The lawmaker singled out the work of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s Fifth Institute of the Academy of Military Medical Sciences (AMMS), the military's top medical research body.

"In 2005, the U.S. State Department publicly stated the U.S. assessment that China also operates an offensive biological weapons program, specifically identifying two Chinese entities as likely involved, one of which is the Fifth Institute. In a 2006 declaration of compliance with the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention, China acknowledged that the Fifth Institute specifically conducts research on SARS coronaviruses," the report reads.

Wenstrup also took note of the book titled "The Unnatural Origin of SARS and New Species of Artificial Humanized Viruses as Genetic Weapons," released by AMMS in 2015.

"The book described how to create weaponized chimeric SARS coronaviruses, the potentially broader scope for their use compared to traditional bioweapons, and the benefits of being able to plausibly deny



Doctor and Congressman Brad Wenstrup (R-Ohio) interviews with NTD Capitol Report on April 2, 2022.

that such chimeric coronaviruses were artificially created rather than naturally occurring," the report states.

The congressman, who is also a medical doctor, said that the military research institute had also collaborated with the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the body at the center of the lab leak theory of the pandemic origins.

Wenstrup said there were "published articles with scientists from the Fifth Institute, as well as the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) ... combining their military with their other areas of research."

He further pointed to a scientist with the PLA's Fifth Institute, General Zhou Yusen, who had reportedly worked with the WIV for years prior to the pandemic. According to Wenstrup, Zhou was "heavy into the gain of function type research or chimeric research."

"Notably, in the spring of 2020, as global COVID-19 cases surpassed 7 million and COVID-19 deaths surpassed 400,000, General Zhou reportedly died under mysterious circumstances," according to the GOP report.

Challenging the Intelligence Community

The lawmaker noted that an update to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI)'s declassified assessment of the origins of COVID-19 released in October 2021 did not address important information that indicates the Chinese regime's interest in offensive bioweapons. "The declassified updated assessment also failed to address the AMMS' publicly stated interest in the development of engineered coronaviruses for biological weapons purposes," the GOP report states.

"The IC [intelligence community] should be transparent regarding what it does or does not know regarding the relationship between the PLA's Fifth Institute of the Academy of Military Medical Sciences (AMMS), which China has publicly admitted conducts bioweapons research and coronavirus experiments, and the WIV," the report continues.

Wenstrup specifically pointed to Zhou's death under questionable circumstances, saying "We want to know what the intelligence community knows about his work, and also about his untimely death and the circumstances around that."

Lack of Cooperation

The lawmaker highlighted that China has consistently failed to cooperate

with investigations into the origins of COVID-19.

"When they finally did let people come to China, they really didn't let them into the lab and to see everything. As a matter of fact, they [investigation group] had to be held in quarantine for one or two weeks before they even got to have a conversation," he said, referring to a team of World Health Organization-recruited scientists who visited China in early 2021 to probe the pandemic origins.

"And interestingly, the only person they would allow from America was a gentleman named Peter Daszak, who was with EcoHealth Alliance, who was getting NIH [National Institutes of Health] funding, and then working with the Chinese on coronavirus type of research," he added.

Daszak is the president of EcoHealth Alliance, a New York-based nonprofit that has drawn considerable scrutiny over funneling federal funding to the WIV for research on coronaviruses, which some experts say amounted to gain-of-function research.

Given the history of collaboration between Daszak and WIV, Wenstrup said there was potential for bias.

Further Investigation

Wenstrup said that the committee would continue to probe the pandemic origins, especially after the Republicans take the gavel in the new year.

"We hope to move forward from here and bring people forward that have been involved with [the Wuhan] Institute of Virology, and any other people that have done this type of science and get their opinions and get knowledge," he said.

"These are always the concerns when it comes to weapons. So we need to continue to delve in that direction. And as the Intelligence Committee, we have the responsibility of oversight and to be aware of the national security threats that may be out there," he added.

It's important to get to the bottom of this question so as to prevent future pandemics from emerging, the congressman said.

"As a physician, I can tell you this is important because we have to know about lab security around the world and for our own sake; we also have to do more to make sure that we are prepared if something like this should ever happen again," he said.

The Epoch Times has reached out to EcoHealth Alliance and ODNI for comments.

THE EPOCH TIMES

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TRUTH AND TRADITION