

# COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

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## Teaching Notes

*Beijing's Global Media Offensive: China's Uneven Campaign to Influence Asia and the World*

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## Summary

In *Beijing's Global Media Offensive: China's Uneven Campaign to Influence Asia and the World*, Joshua Kurlantzick analyzes China's efforts to become a superpower influencer, as it seeks for the first time to shape the domestic politics, local media, and information environments of the United States, East Asia, parts of Europe, and the broader world.

Many observers of China's ascendancy toward great power status have focused on its economic growth and expanding military power while viewing its ability to project power through media industries and global influence campaigns as quite limited—and its ability to influence the domestic politics of countries outside a few in its near region as nonexistent. But as shown in *Beijing's Global Media Offensive*, dramatic changes are underway.

The book provides an authoritative account of how this sophisticated and multipronged campaign is unfolding around the world in the United States, where Beijing has become the biggest spender on

foreign influence activities, to Europe, and to China's immediate neighborhood—Southeast Asia, Taiwan, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. The author also traces ways in which China is increasingly collaborating with Russia in its efforts to gain global influence via disinformation and other tools.

Kurlantzick critically examines the degree of success Beijing has enjoyed with these efforts. While China has worked hard at becoming a media and influence superpower, it sometimes has failed to reap gains, undermining itself with overly assertive and alienating diplomacy. Still, Kurlantzick contends, China's media, information, disinformation, and more traditional influence campaigns will continue to expand and adapt. The campaigns will potentially help Beijing protect the ruling party and build alliances with autocracies, while undermining press freedoms, human rights, and democracy across the globe.

This book is suitable for the following undergraduate and graduate courses:

- International Relations
- Media Studies/Communications
- China Studies/East Asia Studies/Southeast Asia Studies
- U.S.-China Relations

## **Discussion Questions**

*For Undergraduate and Graduate Courses*

### **Courses on International Relations:**

1. What differences, if any, can one see between how China has constructed its state media and information empire and how Russia and Qatar have?
2. What lessons can be drawn from China's alternating attempts to win favor with a wide range of developing countries either through aid and diplomacy or through coercion and other hard-edged tools?
3. How can the United States and China and Taiwan come to a lasting resolution of tensions that avoids a war over Taiwan that would be catastrophic and would destroy the world economy?
4. What role does the cult of personality/one-man-rule type of government have on how China exerts power internationally?
5. What impact has China's relationship with Russia had on China's approach to international relations?

### **Courses on Media Studies/Communications:**

1. Has China's control of the press shaped coverage of China among the Chinese diaspora?
2. What are the effects of Beijing's Chinese-language coverage worldwide on Chinese foreign policy and on diaspora relations with China?
3. How do China's state media outlets compare with Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, the BBC, and other outlets backed by governments in Europe and North America?
4. How has the global decline of the media industry, with many publications closing, journalists losing their jobs, and trust in most media outlets declining, impacted China's ability to spread its state media globally?

5. How has the lack of regulation and moderation of conspiracy theories and disinformation on most major social media platforms affected China's approach to major platforms and its use of disinformation?

**Courses on China Studies/East Asia Studies/Southeast Asia Studies:**

1. How will China's growing economic centralization, rising authoritarianism, and weak growth affect its economy in the longer term, and how will these factors impact its foreign policies?
2. How do China's massive aid projects—most notably, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—influence views of China across Asia and in other parts of the world?
3. How is China adapting to critiques of the initial round of BRI loans and projects?
4. How effective has China been in wielding influence within the politics and societies of its nearest neighbors in Southeast Asia and Taiwan? Are these places recognizing this influence? Is it possible for China's neighbors to effectively rebut such influence?

**Courses on U.S.-China Relations:**

1. Will China and other countries with which it has partnered be successful in creating alternatives to the United States as the key actor in the international financial system and the dollar as the global reserve currency?
2. Can the United States and China compete in many critical areas while cooperating on vital global issues like climate change?
3. How effective has China been at wielding influence within the United States?
4. How has the tough bipartisan U.S. response to China affected the Chinese-American community?
5. How can the United States effectively prevent Chinese espionage and illicit influence activities without stigmatizing Chinese-Americans, as occurred during the China Initiative, the first FBI efforts to launch a major counterintelligence program against Beijing?

## Essay Questions

*For Undergraduate and Graduate Courses*

**Courses on International Relations:**

1. What does China's newfound assertiveness under Xi Jinping say about how Beijing plans to conduct itself on the world stage going forward, and is there a possibility that the U.S. and China can come to some accommodation for global order without conflict?
2. Compare and contrast the challenges to U.S.-China coexistence in the global order today with those faced by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

**Courses on Media Studies/Communications:**

1. Is it possible for an authoritarian state to create an international news channel—television, radio, print, or online—that is viewed as credible by consumers around the globe?
2. Compare and contrast concerns by politicians in democratic states about TikTok, its links to China and security flaws with their concerns about U.S.-based social media (including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) security flaws, lack of moderation, and privacy issues.

**Courses on China Studies/East Asia Studies/Southeast Asia Studies:**

1. Analyze and compare how the most powerful states in Southeast Asia—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—navigate close security ties with the United States and economic reliance on trade, aid, and investment from China.
2. Analyze and discuss what tools smaller states in South Asia, Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands have in asserting their power vis-à-vis both China and the United States.

### **Courses on U.S.-China Relations:**

1. Compare the situation today, with an emerging great power (China) and an established one (the United States) to prior eras in which such situations occurred. Discuss the ways in which conflicts were avoided when one emerging great power challenged an established power.
2. Today, there are fewer democracies than fifteen years ago, more disillusionment with democracy, and serious democratic challenges in the United States. Discuss the effect of the global decline in democracy on U.S.-China relations and on China's (as well as Russia's) influence in the world more broadly.

## **Further Projects**

### **Op-Ed One**

Argue how China's efforts to influence the domestic affairs and politics of countries around the world is drastically different from similar longstanding efforts by the United States, and why China's efforts might be more problematic for the affected countries.

### **Op-Ed Two**

Argue how China's efforts to influence the domestic affairs and politics of countries around the world is not in any way different from similar longstanding efforts by the United States, and why China's efforts are not more problematic for the affected countries than decades of U.S. intervention.

### **Policy Memo**

Examine the ways in which China has or has not succeeded in wielding political influence over politicians and elections in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Taiwan, and the United States. Discuss what the determinants of Beijing's success or failure have been and what these places should do to strengthen defense against foreign political influence.

### **Mock Debate**

Argue the pros and cons of the resolution:

Resolved: Given that TikTok's parent company is based in China, has a seat on its board controlled by the Communist Party, and has been shown to have exfiltrated some user data to China, TikTok should be banned from use in the United States and other leading democracies, by removing it from all main app stores.

## **Supplementary Reading Materials**

AidData, "Influencing the Narrative: How the Chinese Government Mobilizes Students and Media to Burnish its Image," December 9, 2019, <https://www.aiddata.org/publications/influencing-the-narrative>.

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Trevor Incerti, Daniel Mattingly, Changwook Ju, Colin Moreshead, Seiki Tanaka, and Hikaru Yamagishi, "Chinese State Media Persuades a Global Audience That the "China Model" Is Superior: Evidence From a 19-Country Experiment" OSF Preprints, January 18, 2023. doi:10.31219/osf.io/5cafd.

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