Graphika

ATLAS

GRAPHIKA HIGHLIGHTS REPORT

Chinese State Influence: Tariffs to Tension

Selected Insights From Graphika's ATLAS Intelligence Reporting on Chinese State Influence Actors and Adjacent Communities

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ATLAS Highlights Report |
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Overview

This report contains selected insights from Graphika's ATLAS intelligence reporting on Chinese state influence actors and adjacent communities between February and March 2025. Graphika subscribers can access a full set of insights, as well as accompanying data and signals. Please visit the [Graphika](#) website for more information. Below is a summary of our findings:

- Chinese state influence actors and aligned communities consistently focus on developments in U.S. foreign policy in their online messaging, particularly in relation to China and Europe. These actors promote narratives almost certainly intended to advance Beijing's strategic interests, such as undermining public support for U.S. trade tariffs, exacerbating tensions between Washington and Europe, and positioning China as a stronger and more reliable diplomatic partner.

- In recent weeks, Chinese state influence actors have seeded and amplified online criticism of increased U.S. trade tariffs on China. This includes claims that the tariffs are unjustified and will disproportionately hurt the U.S. and U.S. workers. In early March, for instance, these actors spread videos and cartoons accusing President Donald Trump of using the fentanyl crisis as an excuse to carry out unjustified acts of economic aggression.

- In recent weeks, Chinese state influence actors have seeded and amplified online narratives highlighting increased diplomatic tensions between the U.S. and its European allies and promoting closer ties with Beijing. In late February, for instance, these actors used division between the U.S. and European allies over the war in Ukraine to claim Washington is "breaking up with the EU." In early March, the actors leveraged decontextualized excerpts of an EU parliamentary address by a U.S. economist to frame China as a "success story" for Europe.

- Chinese state influence actors will almost certainly continue with this and related messaging efforts as Beijing seeks to undermine support for the U.S. and capitalize on opportunities to advance its own diplomatic agenda. This activity presents a challenge for governments seeking to successfully navigate a rapidly evolving online information environment and a risk to individuals and organizations who may be targeted with defamatory narratives or "patriotic" boycotts and other hostile online activities.

Insights

Pro-China, Spamouflage-Linked Actors Accuse the US of Exploiting Fentanyl Crisis to Impose Tariffs

Published on March 14, 2025

Key Finding: Across platforms, pro-China actors, Chinese diplomats, state media, and assets linked to Chinese state-linked influence operation (IO) Spamouflage are promoting the claim that the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump is using the fentanyl crisis as an excuse to impose tariffs on China.

Why It Matters: This activity highlights pro-China actors' attempts to amplify state-aligned narratives by shifting blame onto the U.S. for the fentanyl crisis and framing the tariffs as unjustified economic aggression.

Online Activity:

- After Trump's Feb. 27 remarks about increasing tariffs on China, pro-China actors, Chinese diplomats, and Chinese state media spread content on X, Facebook, YouTube, WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin, accusing the U.S. of using the fentanyl crisis as an excuse to impose high tariffs on China.

- Several accounts, especially on X and Facebook, used a cartoon to accuse the U.S. of wrongly blaming China for the crisis. Several state-affiliated actors shared a link to a recent Chinese government report on its efforts to manage the crisis.

- Spamouflage-linked X accounts reposted a video with the caption "美国吸毒者的自述" ("Confessions of American Drug Addicts"), showing American fentanyl addicts telling their stories. We assess the accounts are likely Spamouflage assets based on their use of randomly generated usernames, stock or stolen profile pictures, and exclusive engagement with other Spamouflage-linked accounts. This content had limited engagement.

- On X, Facebook, and to a lesser extent on WeChat, Weibo, and Toutiao, pro-China actors and Chinese state media shared a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson statement about China being "ready to fight till the end" with the U.S.

Screenshot of a video reposted by several Spamouflage-linked accounts, with the caption "美国吸毒者的自述" ("Confessions of American Drug Addicts").
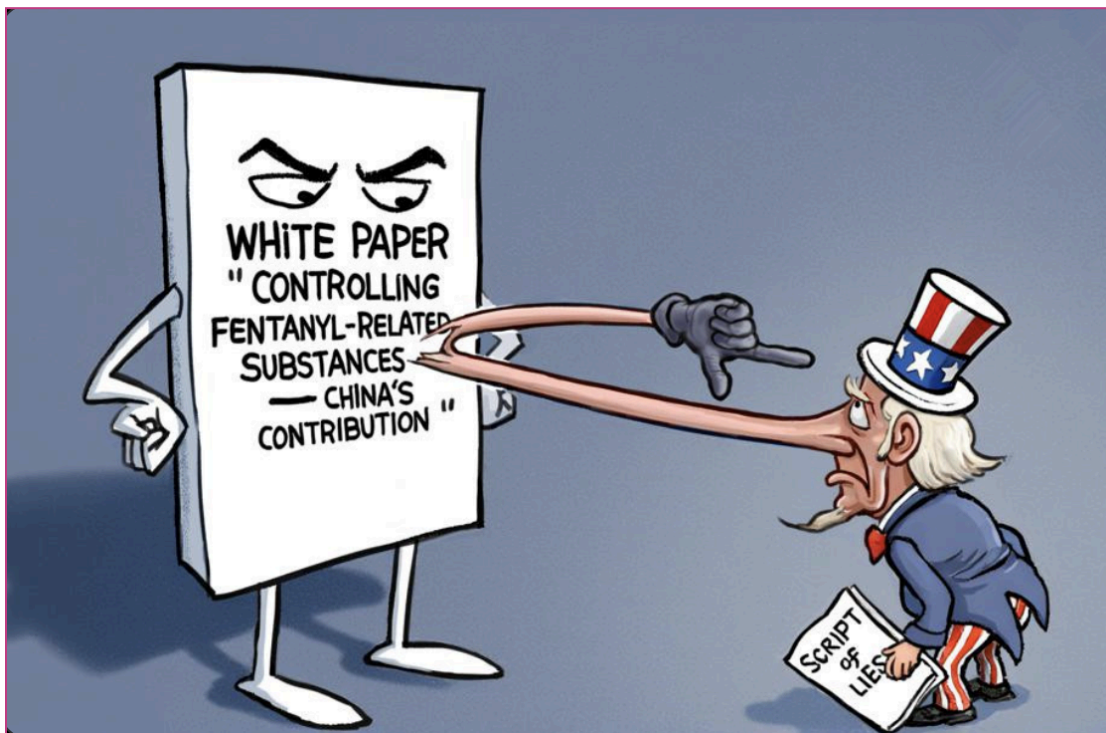
A cartoon used by several pro-China actors, especially on X and Facebook, accusing the U.S. of wrongfully blaming China for the fentanyl crisis.

Pro-China Actors, State Media Leverage US Economist's Speech at EU Parliament to Promote Closer China-EU Ties

Published on *March 7, 2025*

Key Finding: Across several platforms, pro-China actors, state media, and Chinese diplomats are selectively amplifying remarks from a U.S. economist at the EU Parliament to portray China as a positive force and an alternative to the U.S.

Why It Matters: This activity exemplifies how Chinese state influence actors leverage Western figures' statements - often out of context - to advance China's diplomatic positioning. The spread of these narratives highlights ongoing efforts to shape perceptions of China amid EU-U.S. tensions.

Online Activity:

- Several Chinese diplomats, state media, and pro-China actors are widely reposting an excerpt from economist Jeffrey Sachs' Feb. 19 speech at the EU Parliament in which he stated that "China is not an enemy" but a "success story" and suggests that the U.S. views China as an adversary due to the larger Chinese economy. Pro-China actors previously used comments from Sachs to suggest that the U.S. is in decline and China is rising as a world leader.

- Many posts from these communities focus on his pro-China claims, often using edited videos that omit the broader context of speech.

- These communities also circulated a separate video clip of Sachs in which he argues that Europe should develop an independent foreign policy that is distinct from U.S. influence. These actors used Sachs' statements to encourage engagement with the Chinese economy and the Belt and Road Initiative.

- Accounts amplified these remarks, primarily in English on X, YouTube, Facebook, WeChat, and Douyin. This activity began in the days after Sachs' Feb. 19 speech, reaching a peak around Feb. 24. This material found significant traction on X, especially among pro-China communities, but received significantly lower engagement on other platforms.

Screenshot of a video edit produced by ChinaDaily which was widely shared across multiple platforms and only focuses on the pro-China claims made in Jeffrey Sachs' speech to the EU parliament.

After UN Vote, Pro-China Accounts Promote Claims US Is 'Breaking Up' With EU

Published on Feb. 28, 2025

Key Finding: After the U.S. voted against U.N. resolutions condemning Russia for invading Ukraine, pro-China accounts on several social media platforms and Chinese state media outlets have shared posts and articles emphasizing a shift in U.S. foreign policy and closer alignment with Russia.

Why It Matters: This activity reflects how Chinese state and pro-China actors attempt to use U.S. policies and geopolitical events to undermine the U.S.'s relations with allies and partner nations, including Japan, Taiwan, and the EU.

Online Activity:

- On X, WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, and Chinese news platforms like Sohu and 163News, pro-China actors and Chinese state media outlets shared posts and articles focused on the "deepening of the U.S.-EU differences." Some claimed that the "U.S. and the EU are drifting apart," that "the US is betraying its allies," or that "the U.S. is breaking up with the EU."

- Several posts, especially on X, used a screenshot of the U.N. vote results on the resolution, with one calling the U.S. vote "UNBELIEVABLE!!!"

- Several likely pro-China accounts on X and other platforms posted identical or nearly identical text reporting the U.N. vote result. The posts had limited reach and engagement.

- Pro-China accounts on Facebook and X also shared reports from Chinese and Western outlets with provocative or eye-catching headlines like "Breaking with Europe?" to emphasize the U.S.' perceived foreign policy shift.

Chinese-language social media accounts shared this image in posts suggesting that the U.S., China, and Russia had formed an alliance following a U.N. resolution vote to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The bottom caption reads: "I will be the emperor of the world and the supreme authority people look up to."

US Tariffs Spur Chinese State-Aligned Actors, Spamouflage-Linked Assets to Spread Critical Claims

Published on Feb. 20, 2025

Key Finding: Chinese state media outlets, pro-China actors, and assets linked to Chinese state-linked influence operation (IO) Spamouflage spread online criticism of U.S. tariffs imposed on China, suggesting they are negatively affecting the U.S. and highlighting China's retaliatory tariffs.

Why It Matters: This activity illustrates Chinese state actors' continued attempts to amplify pro-China narratives among Western audiences while undermining U.S. credibility, likely in an effort to align public perceptions with Beijing's interests.

Online Activity:

- After U.S. President Donald Trump imposed the tariffs on Feb. 1, Chinese state media, diplomats, and pro-China accounts spread English-language, anti-U.S. claims on X, Facebook, and YouTube. This included interviews with U.S. residents criticizing the tariffs and expressing concern, and a U.S. economist who posited that tariffs reduce the U.S. standard of living.

- Spamouflage-linked accounts posted cartoons framing the tariffs as a "bomb" that would hurt ordinary people. We assess that the accounts are likely Spamouflage assets based on their use of randomly generated usernames and stock or stolen profile pictures, plus exclusive engagement with other Spamouflage-linked accounts.

- A YouTube channel with activity resembling that of the Shadow Play IO – based on its synthetic voiceovers, stock videos, and likely AI-generated thumbnail images – also promoted the tariff criticism. This channel heavily denigrates U.S. trade moves against China, Japan, and other countries, depicting China as a powerful country that "Trump fears" while highlighting Chinese action against U.S. companies.

- Across Facebook, YouTube, X, QQ, and Weibo, pro-China accounts shared a video clip from state media outlet CCTV praising China's retaliatory tariffs and disparaging the U.S. for "choosing the wrong target." The video has amassed around 1.2 million views in total, mainly on the Chinese sites.

Covert Chinese assets linked to the Spamouflage and Shadow Play networks promoted anti-U.S. and pro-China narratives in response to U.S. tariffs aimed at China.

Estimative Language Legend

Assessments of Likelihood

Graphika uses the following vocabulary to indicate the likelihood of a hypothesis proving correct. If we are unable to assess likelihood due to limited or non-existent information, we may use terms such as "suggest."

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Real Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain(ly)
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%

Confidence Levels: Indicators of Sourcing and Corroboration

Graphika uses confidence levels to indicate the quality of information, sources, and corroboration underpinning our assessments.

Low Confidence	Medium Confidence	High Confidence
Assessment based on information from a non-trusted source and/or information we have not been able to independently corroborate.	Assessment based on information that we are unable to sufficiently corroborate and/or information open to multiple interpretations.	Assessment based on information from multiple trusted sources that we are able to fully corroborate.

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About Us

Graphika *is the most trusted provider of actionable open-source intelligence to help organizations stay ahead of emerging online events and make decisions on how to navigate them. Led by prominent innovators and technologists in the field of online discourse analysis, Graphika supports global enterprises and public sector customers across trust & safety, cyber threat intelligence, and strategic communications spanning industries including intelligence, technology, media and entertainment, and global banking. Graphika continually integrates new and emerging technologies into our proprietary intelligence platform and analytic services, empowering our customers with high-precision intelligence and confidence to operate in a complex and continuously evolving information environment.*

For more information or to request a demo, [visit] our website.