Graphika

ATLAS

GRAPHIKA HIGHLIGHTS REPORT

Chinese State Influence

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

01.2025

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 November 2024 and January 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 covert influence operations have impersonated human rights organizations critical of Beijing, almost certainly in an effort to discredit their activities and disrupt domestic political conversations in Western countries. The state-linked Spamouflage operation, for instance, has repeatedly targeted the Spain-based non-profit Safeguard Defenders and in January posed as the organization to spread online calls for the Spanish government to be overthrown in response to deadly floods in Valencia. This is the first time we have seen Spamouflage directly calling for the overthrow of a foreign government.

- Chinese state influence actors and pro-China communities continue to leverage international trade issues in their efforts to advance Beijing's strategic interests. In recent weeks, this has included attempts to orchestrate a boycott of Japanese retail brand Uniqlo due to the company's reported refusal to use cotton from China's Xinjiang region, and efforts to exacerbate tensions between the U.S. and Japan over a blocked steel company merger.

- Chinese officials and state media have used social media and other online platforms to dismiss and deflect allegations of Chinese state hacking activity. After Japan accused China in January of orchestrating a years-long hacking campaign against Japanese government agencies and companies, for example, Chinese state actors spread statements dismissing the allegations as groundless and disseminated cartoons casting Tokyo as an agent of U.S. "disinformation."

- Overt and covert Chinese state influence actors have engaged in a sustained effort to advance narratives that reinforce Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea and attempt to legitimize its activities in the region. In November, these actors amplified comments by an international law scholar that appeared to support China's position.

Insights

Suspected Chinese State-Linked Influence Operation Seeds Content Impersonating Human Rights Group, Urges 'Overthrow' of Spanish Government

Published on Jan. 16, 2025

Key Finding: Accounts we assess with high confidence are part of the Chinese state-linked influence operation Spamouflage seeded content impersonating the Madrid-based human rights organization Safeguard Defenders across multiple mainstream and alternative platforms, leveraging deadly floods in Valencia to suggest that the Spanish government should be overthrown.

Why It Matters: This activity is almost certainly an attempt to discredit Safeguard Defenders, which Spamouflage has repeatedly targeted after the organization accused the Chinese government of running police stations overseas in 2022. This is the first time we have seen Spamouflage directly calling to overthrow a foreign government.

Online Activity:

- We identified dozens of likely inauthentic accounts across BlueSky, Facebook, Gettr, TikTok, X, YouTube, and other platforms seeding videos, images, and test content impersonating Safeguard Defenders, often using the hashtags #spanish and #government. The activity has been ongoing since at least Dec. 9, 2024.

- This content, promoted in English and Spanish, purported to show Safeguard Defenders criticizing the government and Valencia's governor Carlos Mazón for their response to the floods.

- The key material in this campaign is a video overlaid with the Safeguard Defenders' logo. The video shows a person wearing a Guy Fawkes mask claiming they are with the organization and aiming to "expose" the government for giving up on "ordinary people." The video ends with a call to overthrow the Spanish government.

- The identified accounts match Spamouflage's behavioral fingerprint, including using likely randomly generated usernames and stock or stolen profile images, engaging exclusively with other Spamouflage-linked videos, posting identical content in close coordination, and impersonating targets. The campaign content also mistakenly spelled Mazón's name as "Carlos Ma Song," which is very likely a Chinese transliteration of Mazón.

- To date, the activity has not garnered attention from authentic online users or Spanish-speaking communities Graphika maps.

Accounts we assess with high confidence as part of the Chinese state-linked influence operation Spamouflage seeded and amplified content impersonating Spain-based Safeguard Defenders, purporting to show the human rights organization calling to "overthrow" the Spanish government.

Example of a suspected Spamouflage account on BlueSky promoting likely AI-generated images purporting to show corrupt politicians versus ordinary people suffering from floods. The images were overlaid with the letter "SD," which likely stands for "Safeguard Defenders," and shared online using Spanish-language captions. (Redactions added by Graphika.)

Chinese State Actors Accuse Japan of Supporting US 'Disinformation' After Tokyo Warns About MirrorFace Hacks

Published on Jan. 16, 2025

Key Finding: After Japan accused the likely China-linked hacking group MirrorFace of attacking Japanese government agencies, companies, and individuals since 2019, Chinese state and pro-China actors claimed on multiple social media platforms that the accusations were baseless and accused Japan of aiding U.S. "disinformation."

Why It Matters: This activity highlights China's strategy of attempting to deflect attention from allegations about its cyber operations by attributing them to adversarial countries or suggesting countries like Japan and the U.S. are trying to "discredit" China.

Online Activity:

- Chinese embassies and state media outlets, including Global Times, Reference News, and China Youth Net, disseminated responses about Japan's claims from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in Chinese and English on X, Facebook, WeChat, and Bilibili. The Chinese MFA dismissed the alert as "neither professional nor responsible," accusing Japan of playing "supporting roles" in assisting the U.S. to "spread disinformation about China."

- Chinese state media tied the incident to earlier reports of alleged Chinese hackers targeting the Philippines government to steal military documents related to the South China Sea, asserting that the U.S. orchestrated these accusations with Japan's complicity. Pro-China communities amplified this narrative on Instagram and Facebook but failed to gain significant traction.

- On Chinese platforms, Chinese state media and pro-China accounts claimed the U.S. intentionally overstated the threat of hackers to undermine improving China-Japan relations.

- Anti-Communist Party of China (CPC) and pro-Japan accounts on X shared Japan's alert alongside the MFA's responses, sparking criticism of China in the posts' comments from Chinese-language anti-CPC users who mocked or dismissed the MFA's statements.

Chinese state media outlets and other users on social media platforms spread the narrative that Japan's warning about MirrorFace attacks was intended to support U.S. efforts against China.

Steel Companies' Lawsuit Motivates Chinese State-Aligned Actors to Further Stoke Japan-US Distrust

Published on Jan. 13, 2025

Key Finding: After U.S. President Joe Biden blocked Nippon Steel's takeover of U.S. Steel, Chinese government officials and state media, as well as pro-China Western and Chinese social media accounts, amplified the companies' lawsuit against Biden and said Japan shouldn't trust the U.S.

Why It Matters: China is experiencing growing tension with both Japan and the U.S. and has expressed strong concerns about Japan's increased ties to the West. This online activity shows how Chinese state and aligned actors attempt to sow discord between the U.S. and its allies, including Japan, to advance China's interests.

Online Activity:

- On Douyin, Facebook, Weibo, X, and YouTube, Chinese state media and pro-China accounts shared Chinese-language videos and posts amplifying the lawsuit and Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's objection to Biden's decision. The posts often highlighted that this is the first time "a well-known Japanese company" has sued a U.S. president.

- Global Times and CGTN, two of the largest Chinese state outlets targeting international audiences, shared cartoons and articles about the lawsuit on Facebook and X, with the

caption "friend or foe?" Chinese diplomats and pro-China accounts further promoted this narrative of U.S. protectionism damaging Japanese interests.

- China Net, a website [owned](#) by China's State Council Information Office, published two Japanese-language articles about the blocked deal and "U.S.-style protectionism."

- Pro-China X accounts and a likely Chinese state-linked WeChat account – whose content is frequently amplified at the request of Chinese media regulators – suggested Japan should "learn the lesson" behind the block and reconsider its U.S. policy.

- These narratives gained significant traction on Chinese social media. On Weibo, posts mentioning "U.S. President Biden Sued" garnered over 21 million views.

Chinese state media published videos amplifying comments by Japanese officials critical of the blocked merger between Nippon Steel and U.S. Steel, suggesting the decision would cause Japan-U.S. relations to deteriorate.
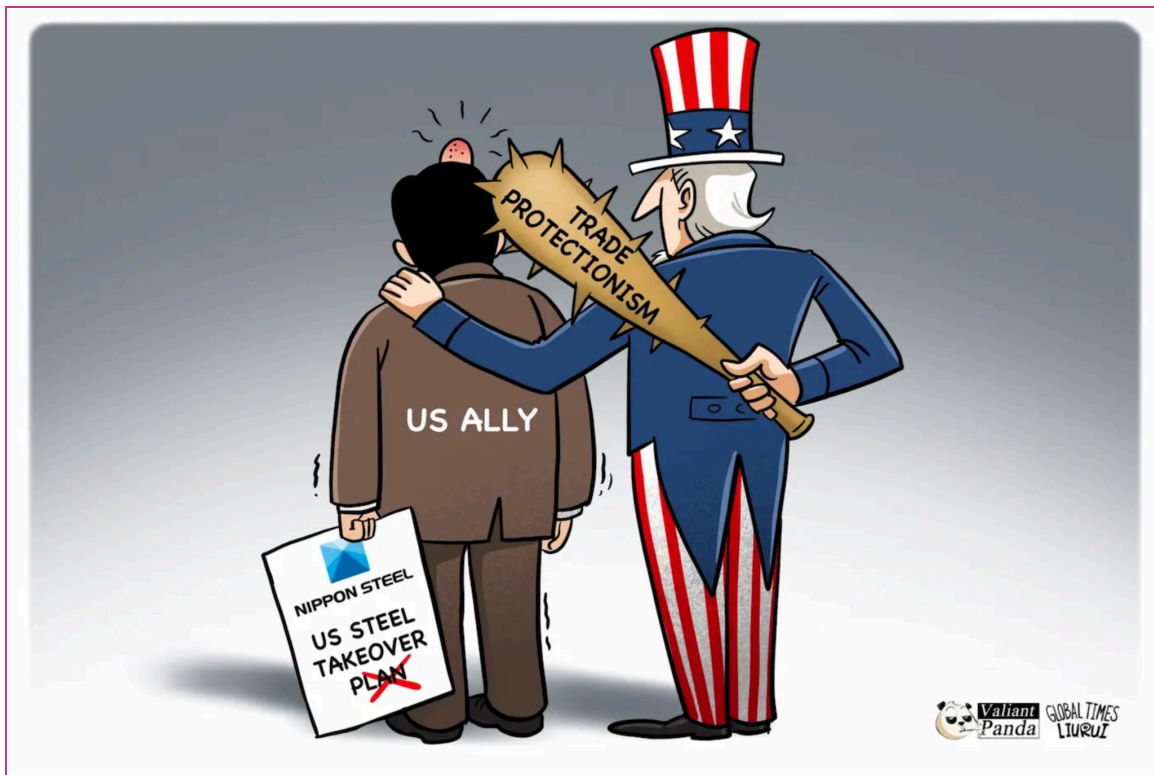
Chinese state media used cartoons, videos, and articles to claim U.S. "trade protectionism" - including Biden's decision to block the U.S. Steel takeover - was damaging allies such as Japan.

Chinese State Actors, Pro-China Communities Call for Boycott of Japanese Company Uniqlo Over Comments About Xinjiang Cotton

Published on Dec. 11, 2024

Key Finding: Chinese state actors and pro-China accounts on Facebook, Weibo, and X called for a boycott of the Japanese retail brand Uniqlo because of the company's reported refusal to use cotton from China's Xinjiang region.

Why It Matters: Global retailers have come under intense pressure not to use cotton from Xinjiang due to reported mistreatment of Uyghur people in the region. This activity highlights how Chinese state and aligned actors have spread messaging to counter the allegations and attempted to orchestrate consumer boycotts targeting companies that challenge Beijing.

Online Activity:

- Following a BBC report on Nov. 28 covering Uniqlo's stance on Xinjiang cotton, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs defended the quality of the material while suggesting that companies are facing "political pressure and malign disruption" to make such decisions. Chinese state media, diplomats, and pro-China accounts further amplified this message across Weibo, X, and Facebook.

- State media outlet People's Daily used "#I support Xinjiang cotton#" (#我支持新疆棉花#) to reinforce the government's narrative. Multiple state-linked media outlets and pro-China accounts also shared the hashtag to show support, generating over 180 million views on Weibo.

- State-linked actors and pro-China accounts also expressed similar sentiments on Facebook, X, Douyin, WeChat, and Bilibili.

- Pro-China accounts on Weibo and X called for a boycott of Uniqlo, a campaign later reported on by Chinese state media outlet CCTV. These calls remained largely contained within these communities.

Chinese state media outlet People's Daily used this image to call for support of Xinjiang cotton with the hashtag #I support Xinjiang cotton# (#我支持新疆棉花#), which generated over 180 million views on Weibo.

Chinese State Media, Spamouflage Use Scholar's Assertions to Support China's Territorial South China Sea Claims

Key Finding: Chinese state actors, accounts associated with the Chinese state-linked influence operation Spamouflage, and other inauthentic accounts have engaged in an ongoing campaign since April 2024 to amplify comments by international law scholar Anthony Carty that the South China Sea belongs to China. Carty made the claims in his book "The History and Sovereignty of the South China Sea," published in Chinese in 2023 and English in 2024.

Why It Matters: This activity highlights how covert and overt Chinese state-linked actors leverage comments by Western scholars to spread online narratives that reinforce China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, and attempt to legitimize its activities in the region.

Online Activity:

- From April to July, Chinese state media and diplomats on Facebook and X shared Carty's assertions that historical materials show South China Sea islands are "territories belonging to China." Carty also described U.S.-Philippines military exercises in the region as "confrontational."

- Starting in September, over 20 Spamouflage-linked accounts on X, Facebook, and YouTube began reiterating Carty's claims in English and Filipino, using identical or similar language and images. Multiple accounts misspelled Carty's last name as "Katie," "Katy," "Katty," or "Kati."

- Likely inauthentic X accounts that promote cryptocurrencies or NFTs in their bios used copypasta language to spread similar content as the Spamouflage accounts. These accounts have fewer than 10 followers, but their posts garnered thousands of views.

- On Reddit, likely inauthentic accounts shared likely AI-generated images of Carty. The accounts said Carty had revealed the "truth" about the "sovereignty of the South China Sea," emphasizing his "profound academic background."
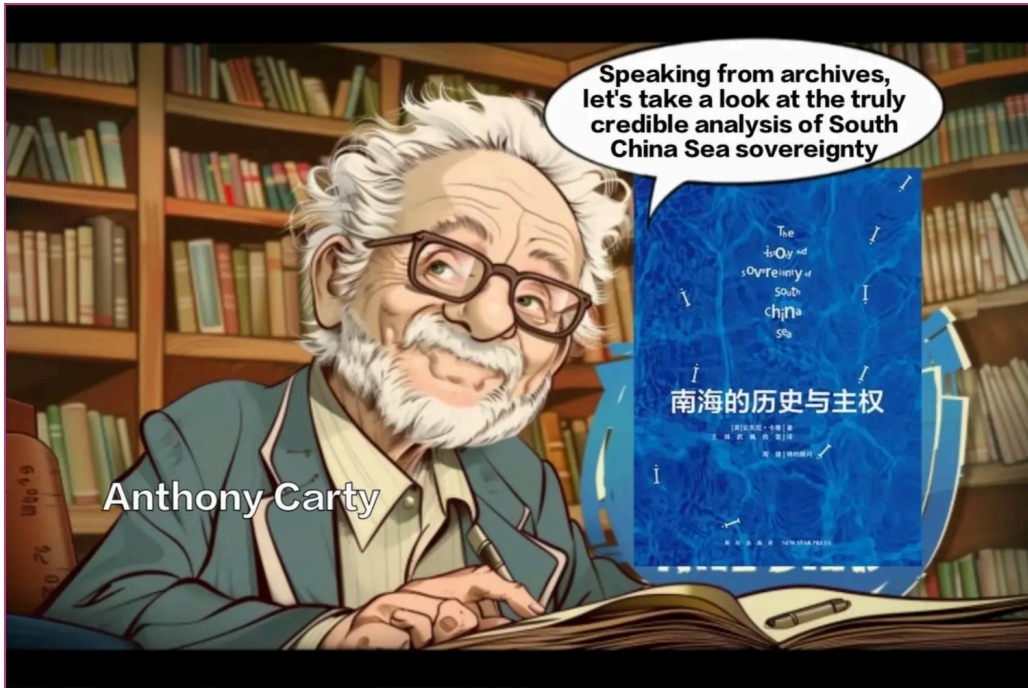
A likely inauthentic account on Reddit shared this likely AI-generated image to promote the narrative, using international law scholar Anthony Carty's assertions that the South China Sea belongs to China.
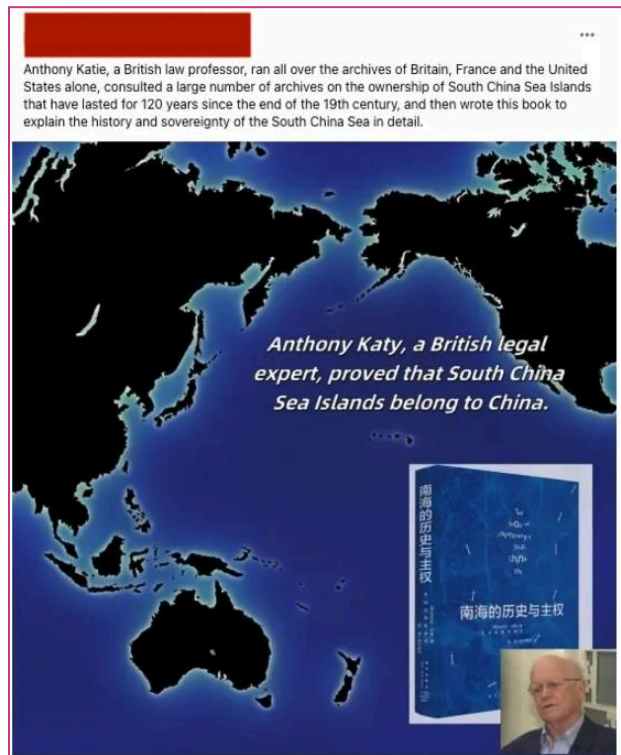
Spamouflage and likely Spamouflage-linked accounts on Facebook used identical or similar text and images to promote claims from scholar Anthony Carty that the South China Sea belongs to China. (Redactions added by Graphika.)

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.

Graphika

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.