

## Empowering Chinese Diaspora Messaging

### Description

In January 2023, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published a report of multiple wargames focused on a People's Republic of China (PRC) invasion of Taiwan. In the more pessimistic scenarios, the US and Japan lost 645 combat aircraft, 28 vessels, and tens of thousands of service members. Despite the significant loss, the wargame showed the US could win, but in a pyrrhic victory: it would emerge with a weakened international position and a decimated military. [CSIS believes](#) that strengthening deterrence through increased cooperation with Japan and improving Taiwanese ground forces capabilities are necessary to prevent this conflict. This recommendation, and the results, are in line with the "Poison Frog" strategy's aim to create Taiwanese defensive network that can survive a PRC invasion long enough to isolate the PRC politically, economically, and militarily but they lack a response option, outside of survival, should deterrence fail.

This paper contends that the US should adopt a more preemptive approach that seeks to weaken the government from within. A key aspect in that effort would be to empower dissidents in the global Chinese diaspora to directly challenge Beijing's hold over information in China and around the world. Developing and propagating Chinese language media and pro-democracy voices, directed at the "Great Firewall" and the Chinese population, is a first step in attacking an inherent weakness in a society with controlled media.

### PRC's focus on an assassin's mace

PRC's success in stalemating the US and the UN in Korea, and the US's defeat in the Vietnam War, inculcated an internal [belief that the PRC could win](#) a "people's war" under modern conditions against the US. The US military showed technological superiority during limited conflicts in Grenada and Panama, but the PRC still believed they could overcome a technologically superior force with a "people's war." The Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq served as a proxy for China's military capabilities and some believed the US would struggle against the Iraqi forces. The US's rapid defeat of the Iraqi military challenged many of the working assumptions of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) about power. US success in Operation Desert Storm was a clarion call to the PRC and PLA leadership, which shifted to [an explicit principle](#) of "whatever the enemy is afraid of, we develop that." This was a foundational principle in the development of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) weapon systems aimed at preventing the US from projecting force in the Indo-Pacific

and freeing the PRC to build its power as a regional hegemon.

The PRC's desire for [assassin's mace](#) weapons that can challenge the US's military strengths and, importantly, sow doubt in the minds of military and civilian planners and leaders, are essential to their quest for regional hegemony. The PLA concentrated resources in building weapons in the struggle against global hegemon. In 2021, the Defense Secretary's [report to Congress](#) noted PRC's sustained effort to develop the capability to attack, at long ranges, military forces that might deploy or operate within the western Pacific, which the DoD characterizes as anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. The PRC developed these weapons to counter the US Navy's strengths. Since that time, the PLA has focused resources on the creation of maneuverable reentry vehicles; hypersonic weapons; directed energy and electromagnetic weapons; and counterspace, unmanned, and artificial intelligence weapons [to continue countering](#) the US military's technological advantages. However, these weapon systems do not change the PRC's fundamental weaknesses.

### **The PRC's need for control**

The US military's focus on high-end combat ensures it is prepared for the outbreak of large-scale conflict and reassures allies and partners. The US cannot focus solely on developing high-end capabilities against the PRC and needs to develop asymmetric capabilities that offer response options targeted at PRC weaknesses. A key PRC weakness the US should target is Beijing's desire for control of Chinese language information in China and within the Chinese diaspora. The US government should prioritize and direct resources for creating a freer flow of communications and messages across the Great Firewall. Returning to the CSIS wargaming report, one of the core assumptions is, "do not plan on striking the mainland." The report argues that the U.S. National Command Authority might withhold permission to strike at PRC locations in China even in the event of a conflict over Taiwan. This may be correct regarding the development of lethal fires options for response, but a key weakness of the PRC is its control and need for control over internal narratives. The PRC's control of China's historical narrative allows it to marshal China's population and resources towards perceived threats. However, the PRC does this by curating China's history to fit its desired narrative. The US can exploit the weakness inherent in a closed society's need for information control by strengthening authentic voices of dissent from the Chinese diaspora.

Direct expansion of the US government's ability to communicate into China has proven difficult given the PRC's control over media and the internet. However, efforts have centered on pushing US created and US-based media into China via channels with limited access and reach in China due to PRC control. Investing in identifying and strengthening networks of social media influencers, reporters, and pro-democracy social groups among the Chinese diaspora in China's near-abroad

and in Taiwan is an asymmetric approach to challenge the PRC. The development and cultivation of Chinese-language media and pro-democracy voices and the propagation of their voices, directed towards the Great Firewall and to the Chinese population, is a first step in attacking an inherent weakness in a society with controlled media.

The PRC acknowledges that the Chinese diaspora is a weakness and has attempted to reinforce adherence to party rule in the diaspora by increasing pressure on regional governments. The PRC has insisted other nations assist in or arrest and deport Chinese citizens they view as harmful, including extradition of Uyghurs and the creation of covert [“police stations”](#) to monitor the diaspora. The time and resource investment in policing this group highlights the latent potential of the diaspora to challenge the PRC. The diaspora’s authenticity and ability to speak to the internal issues of the PRC is a core weakness of the party’s control that the US can support. The US government should increase support to voices within the Chinese diaspora and assist in amplifying their voices and their ability to scale the “Great Firewall.”

The PRC’s ability to influence state behavior is evident in Australia, a close American ally in the Indo-Pacific. [Professor Wanning Sun](#) at the University of Technology Sydney noted in 2016 that: “Across the board, the Chinese-language media in Australia have had to shift their business strategies to cater to this Mandarin-speaking cohort, and thereby sustain the viability of their businesses. As a result, migrant Chinese media—and, for that matter, mainstream Australian media have been willing to lend their platforms as carriers of China’s state media.”

This is a cycle that the [PRC has repeated](#) in multiple countries and highlights the opportunity that exists and fear the PRC has regarding these communities. Andrew Chubb of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) developed a [useful analysis](#) of the types of influence operations the PRC engages in that highlights their assessed vulnerabilities. This chart highlights the PRC’s interest, their target issues, and selected messaging themes and methods they employ.

image

The PRC’s focus on the extraterritorial suppression of dissent and control of diaspora media are opportunities the US and allies can exploit to challenge the PRC’s control of media narratives and expand their reach into China. The US should identify and assist in funding credible, independent Chinese language journalism globally, specifically aimed at the Chinese diaspora. Additionally, as the US and allies identify [targets of censorship](#), they should provide support to these individuals and assistance in maintaining their platforms and avoiding PRC surveillance and harassment. These small actions will provide these actors a space to challenge PRC’s media control.

The US must expand support to these voices beyond Voice of America and Radio Free Asia and invest in the types of media currently consumed within the Chinese diaspora. This means increasing support to media and influencers using WeChat, Weibo, Tencent, and Douyin, as these systems can more readily reach beyond the Great Firewall into mainland China. This must be a whole-of-government approach to identify and support these personalities with funding and amplification. Additionally, by identifying and supporting these networks, the US government can tie these voices together and assist in creating a more resilient and unified dissident community.

### **The war that doesn't come**

A US-PRC conflict over Taiwan is a worst-case scenario for all parties involved. The risk for escalation is high and the US exposed some of its most powerful financial options in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The PRC's focus on creating asymmetric advantages and attempts to limit its exposure to US economic pressure increase the need for the US to develop asymmetric responses that target the PRC's inherent weaknesses. Any of these plans must also include challenges to the PRC's continued efforts to control the Chinese diaspora. Challenges to PRC's control will sow doubt regarding its ability to win a war over Taiwan. Voices of dissent within the Chinese diaspora can more readily carry across cultural and technological barriers and speak with an authenticity that lends weight to their criticism. These criticisms and the ability to speak to the Chinese people are direct challenges to the Communist Party's control over China. Affecting this decision making requires investment beyond Taiwan and a prioritization of influence options now.

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*Main image: Chinatown, San Francisco (Tony Webster/Wikimedia)*

### **Date Created**

2023/12/12