

# Research Reports

Research Group on 'The Japan-US alliance'

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## Disinformation Threats during a Taiwan Contingency and Countermeasures

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### Introduction

"The threat is manifest during this decade, in fact in the next six years."

Philip Davidson, the former commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, told the United States Senate Committee on Armed Services in March 2021 that China could invade Taiwan within six years. This remark triggered a growing discussion of a contingency in Taiwan as the realistic possibility.

A Taiwan contingency means that a state of war, or a military conflict close to war, takes place in Taiwan. Given its geographical proximity, this is a serious situation that could certainly involve Japan. However, Japan must make diplomatic efforts to prevent a contingency in Taiwan from occurring. At the same time, it is necessary to make various preparations, including the development of defense capabilities, for a contingency in Taiwan which should include active consideration on how to counter the information war to be deployed by China, in particular disinformation campaign.<sup>1</sup> This paper examines the threat of disinformation campaigns that could be undertaken in Japan and countermeasures that should be taken with a Taiwan contingency in mind.

## Russia's Information War in the Ukraine Crisis

Disinformation campaigns by other countries can have a significant impact on public opinion and the government's decision-making process. Concepts that tend to inflame certain divisions are more likely to be exploited, while people or groups that are more susceptible to emotion may be targeted. It is highly likely that China will launch a disinformation campaign not only against Taiwan but also against Japan, and Japan should be alert.

Here I would like to review the disinformation campaign that the Russian government launched in relation to Ukraine when it annexed Crimea in 2014. During the intervention in Crimea, Russia engaged in a hybrid war that combined cyber-attacks, electronic attacks, and information warfare. The Russian government engaged in information warfare for three main purposes: to discredit the new government in Ukraine, to assert that the land of Crimea is historically part of Russia, and to emphasize the danger to ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers in Crimea.<sup>ii</sup> Among the assertions made by the Russian government were "the Russian government was not involved in the riots", "the political upheavals in Kyiv in February were masterminded by the West and the United States" and "Ukraine has serious Nazi and fascist problems." Such disinformation from Russia exerted influence on the formation of people's perceptions and, as a result, it proved advantageous in promoting Russian military intervention.<sup>iiiiv</sup>

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched an armed invasion of Ukraine. From the moment Russia deployed large-scale military units around its border with Ukraine, Putin has been stressing that Ukrainians and Russians are one people. Russia has made it clear that it opposes Ukraine's entry into NATO. The "One Nation" that Russia emphasizes in this context dates back to the ninth century. Russia's argument is that the two countries are "one people" that originated in the medieval nation "Kievan Rus" and are a community linked by history, language and religion.

China is studying the military operations of the United States and Russia, and there is a possibility that it will use various information warfare methods based on Russia's methods of intervention if it tries to use military force against Taiwan. Historically, China and Russia have taken different approaches to achieving their diplomatic goals. While Russia has placed great importance on disrupting foreign societies and dividing public opinion, China has made efforts to enhance its economic ties and influence while fostering a positive global perception of China. However, since the global spread of COVID-19, the two methods of disinformation campaigns have become more similar.<sup>v</sup> In its disinformation campaign, China has widely disseminated information that holds the United States responsible for the origins of the virus and criticized racial discrimination in the United States. As seen in these approaches, China and Russia are currently seeking to find common purpose in undermining democratic norms and institutions, weakening the unity of countries and regions that share democratic values, and reducing the influence of the United States in the international community.<sup>vi</sup> In the future,

China and Russia may use each other's platforms and propaganda in disinformation campaigns to make a bigger impact.<sup>vii</sup>

## Possible Disinformation Threats during a Taiwan Contingency

China's fundamental strategy is to estrange Japan from the United States. In particular, it has been pointed out that Okinawa, where US military bases in Japan are concentrated, is an environment in which public opinion can be easily divided and in which it is easy for China to form public opinion in its favor.<sup>viii</sup> In this regard, it is quite possible that an information war against Okinawa could be waged even before the start of an armed invasion, and disinformation could be disseminated that would, for example, increase residents' distrust of the US military.

From a historical perspective, we should also pay close attention to the fact that China has pointed out that Okinawa was originally an independent state called Ryukyu, which was subordinate to the Qing dynasty. The Public Security Intelligence Agency's January 2017 report "Review and Prospects of Internal and External Situations" points out that Chinese universities and think tanks that are interested in the "theory of the undetermined attribution of the Ryukyus" are promoting exchanges with Japanese organizations that advocate Ryukyu independence. The August 12, 2016 issue of *the Global Times* carried an article titled "the attribution of Ryukyu is undecided, and the Ryukyus should not be called Okinawa," which said, "the United States only handed over the administrative rights over the Ryukyus to Japan, but the attribution of the Ryukyus is undecided," and that China had "for a long time called the Ryukyus 'Okinawa,' but this designation is equivalent to implicitly assuming the sovereignty of the Ryukyus in Japan; we should not use it." In the future, China will further intensify its moves in relation to Taiwan, and it is likely that information warfare will develop as a peacetime "ground leveler" through outreach to the people of Okinawa, where US military bases are concentrated.

It is also necessary to be alert for the moves by China to seriously threaten to divide Japan and weaken the defense capabilities of Japan and the United States in the case of an impending Chinese military invasion of Taiwan. Public opinion division is a serious problem that not only instantly spreads a great deal of confrontation and criticism but also risks splitting society over the long term. By asserting to the Japanese people that "US military bases in Japan and US military action will involve Japan in a war," it may be possible to trigger people's military allergy to military matters and incite demonstrations against the war, US forces and their bases in Japan. Moreover, in order to prevent Japan from intervening in an contingency in Taiwan, China may try to fan anti-war sentiment among the Japanese people by disseminating information such as that the Sakishima Islands and parts of Kyushu and Honshu will become scenes of fierce fighting with China, or that an all-out attack will be launched against Japan if war breaks out between the United States and China and Japan joins on the side of the United States. In addition, it is conceivable that China would seek to create an environment that would increase public distrust of the US military and incite opposition to the Japan-US alliance

itself. Thus, it is necessary to recognize that information warfare during a contingency in Taiwan can escalate from peacetime to post-military conflict.

## Public-Private Partnerships to Counter Disinformation

Japan still has a number of issues to address in dealing with foreign influence operations. In the first place, the perception of disinformation as a threat in Japan differs greatly from that in Europe and the United States, and the government has yet to establish any firm countermeasures. In Japan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications has played a central role in considering measures against disinformation in Japan, often called "measures against fake news" or "measures against disinformation". In 2018, efforts such as the study group on platform services were launched to study the appropriate handling of user information by platformers, but these efforts have not been made with the threat of influence operation, including dissemination of disinformation from overseas, in mind. Furthermore, the final report states that it is appropriate for the government to encourage countermeasures based on voluntary efforts by the private sector while giving consideration to freedom of expression, indicating no intent on the part of the government to take the initiative in implementing disinformation countermeasures such as legislation.<sup>ix</sup> This is why some think tanks in Japan are calling for government disinformation countermeasures.<sup>x</sup>

In Japan, disinformation countermeasures have extremely low priority. The perception that speech itself has become one of the main areas for intervention by other countries and national confrontation, and that disinformation threats must be treated as a security issue, is not as prevalent in Japan as it is in the United States and Europe. One reason given for this is that Japan has been protected from the intense disinformation threats from abroad by the complicated language barrier, the existence of traditional media and the high dependence on them, and the negative and even antagonistic public sentiment toward China.<sup>xi</sup> As AI translation and other technologies improve in accuracy, though, these barriers could be broken.

The targets in gray-zone situations such as disinformation campaigns are not limited to national governments but also include local governments, public institutions, businesses, civil society, and individual citizens. In order to protect the nation and its people from the threat of disinformation, it is essential for the government and the private sector to fully cooperate in responding to the threat. The National Security Secretariat (NSS) and other agencies should play a central role in directing and supervising disinformation countermeasures, and the creation of a system that enables cross-sectional responses and coordination among relevant ministries and agencies should be considered.

It is also important for the government to have the ability to monitor disinformation and respond immediately, while sharing with the media a common awareness of the risks involved. It is necessary to cooperate with civil society to this end. Efforts should also be made to monitor cyber-attacks in both

the public and private sectors even during ordinary times, support private organizations to expand their fact-checking functions, establish mechanisms for sharing information between the public and private sectors, and further discuss the role of platform companies. Freedom of expression and freedom of the press will be major considerations in promoting disinformation countermeasures. Hungary, Brazil and the Philippines, for instance, have made attempts to crack down on disinformation through legislation such as anti-fake news laws as part of their efforts to combat COVID-19. Discussions should be pursued while bearing in mind that international non-governmental organizations have criticized governments for arbitrarily using loopholes in legislation to restrict citizens' freedom of expression.<sup>xii</sup>

It will also be extremely important to promote international cooperation in disinformation countermeasures. Taiwan and European countries have shown a strong interest in cooperating on disinformation countermeasures to protect democracy, and international cooperation in this field is expected to enter an important phase in the future. Japan must also cooperate at various levels with countries and regions that share its democratic values and seek mechanisms for cooperating on countermeasures. With a contingency in Taiwan in mind, it is also important to undertake dialogue with the United States and Taiwan on disinformation countermeasures and continue efforts with a shared sense of threat.

## Conclusion

Disinformation can spread farther, faster, and wider than the truth due to the novelty of the information and the emotional responses of recipients. People are especially likely to be paranoid and to believe in hoaxes and conspiracy theories when a major crisis is imminent. Countermeasures against disinformation are an important national security issue. With interest growing around Taiwan contingencies, it is time for Japan to accelerate discussions on countermeasures.

(This is English translation of Japanese paper originally published on March 1.)

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<sup>i</sup> Kyoko Kuwahara, "Shiranuma ni Susumu Eikyoryoku Kousaku: Cyugoku ga Mokuromu Nchibe no 'Bundan' (Insidious Influence Operation: China Seeks to 'Break' Japan and the United States)," *Wedge*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 54 - 56.

<sup>ii</sup> Michael Kofman, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, Andrew Radin, Olesya Tkacheva and Jenny Oberholtzer, "Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine," RAND Corporation, 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> Yu Koizumi, *Military Strategy of Modern Russia*, Chikuma Shobo Publishers, 2014.

<sup>iv</sup> The U.S. Department of State's Global Engagement Center, "Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik's Roles in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem," *GEC Special Report*, January 2022.

<sup>v</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, "Converging Chinese and Russian Disinformation Compounds Threat to Democracy," *Power 3.0*, The National Endowment for Democracy, May 26, 2020.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> See, for example, Public Security Intelligence Agency, "Review and Prospects of Internal and External Situations", January 2017, p. 23.

<sup>ix</sup> Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications "Study Group on Platform Services Final Report", February 2020.

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<sup>x</sup> For example, on February 7, 2022, the Sasakawa Peace Foundation published a policy proposal calling for the development of legislation and a system for disinformation countermeasures.

<sup>xi</sup> According to a 2021 poll by Genron NPO, 90.9% of Japanese people have a negative impression of China, the fourth highest level in the survey since 2005.

<sup>xii</sup> For example, the International Press Institute (IPI) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) have condemned it.