

New Anti-China Propaganda Uses Russiagate Playbook

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A rabid anti-China propaganda campaign has spread through the media since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The hysteria seems to be just as contagious as the virus, as Americans are bombarded with anti-China stories from the pages of The New York Times to segments on Fox News. Both Republicans and Democrats are arguing the other side is not tough enough on China as they gear up for the 2020 election.

Since Donald Trump was elected president, the [unfounded claim](#) that [Russia meddled](#) in the 2016 election was spread far and wide by intelligence officials and liberal media outlets.

A common tactic used to promote the Russiagate narrative was unnamed officials [making statements to the press](#) without providing evidence or any factual basis to their claims. Another common tactic was frequent media appearances by former intelligence officials, like [James Clapper](#) and [John Brennan](#), usually making wild accusations about Trump and Russia. These tactics are being repeated to promote an anti-China narrative.

The *New York Times* [ran a story](#) on April 22nd titled, “Chinese Agents Helped Spread Messages That Sowed Virus Panic in US, Officials Say.” The article says rumors that were spread through text messages and social media posts in mid-March that claimed the Trump administration was going to lock down the entire country to combat coronavirus were boosted by “Chinese operatives.” The authors’ sources are “six American officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to publicly discuss intelligence matters.”

The story is lacking in detail and provides no evidence for the officials’ claims. “The origin of the messages remains murky. American officials declined to reveal details of the intelligence linking Chinese agents to the dissemination of the disinformation, citing the need to protect their sources and methods for monitoring Beijing’s activities,” the story reads. Two of the officials told the *Times* that “they did not believe Chinese operatives created the lockdown messages, but rather amplified existing ones.”

Sensationalized reporting in the *Times* would not be complete without mentioning the Russians. “American officials said the operatives had adopted some of the techniques mastered by Russia-backed trolls, such as creating fake social media accounts to push messages to sympathetic Americans, who in turn unwittingly help spread them.”

Ironically, the story recognizes the danger of US officials making selective leaks to the media. “Foreign policy analysts are worried that the Trump administration may politicize intelligence work or make selective leaks to promote an anti-China narrative ... American officials in the past have selectively passed intelligence to reporters to shape the domestic

political landscape.” The *Times* uses the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq as an example of the dangers of selective leaks, ignoring the past four years of Russiagate stories that plagued its pages.

On April 17th, Fox News Host Tucker Carlson had former CIA officer Bryan Dean Wright [on his show](#) to deliver some wild accusations about US politicians and the Chinese government. Wright insinuated that some members of Congress might be agents of China’s intelligence service, the Ministry of State Security (MSS). Carlson explained to Wright that the show reached out to Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and other elected officials to ask if they’ve had contact with any Chinese officials since the coronavirus outbreak began. Carlson said they did not respond and asked Wright, “What do you think we should infer from that?”

Wright responded, “I think that they’re nervous. I think there are a bunch of people who, because they’re either useful idiots or they have some degree of knowledge and relationships behind the scenes with the Chinese government. Some of them in fact could be Chinese agents of the MSS.” Wright’s language comes straight from the Russiagate playbook. Intelligence officials and media pundits [often referred to Trump](#) as a “useful idiot” for Moscow, and some even [speculated](#) that the president is a “Russian agent.”

Trump’s [anti-Russia policies](#) show that he is not working in the White House on behalf of Vladimir Putin. Similarly, anti-China legislation that has recently passed through the House and Senate makes it unlikely any MSS agents are working in the halls of Congress.

[The Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act](#) passed unanimously through the Senate last year and had one lone nay vote in the House from Rep. Thomas Massie (R-KY). The act, which was signed into law by President Trump, requires the State Department to prepare an annual report on the autonomy of Hong Kong from mainland China. The act also requires the Commerce Department to report on “China’s efforts to use Hong Kong to evade US export controls.” The bill says the president shall present Congress with a list of any individuals that violate human rights in Hong Kong. Any findings that are unsatisfactory to the US could result in sanctions.

[The Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act](#) was also passed unanimously through the Senate, and again, Rep. Massie was the only one to vote against the bill in the House. This bill, which has not made it to President Trump’s desk, would require the US to impose sanctions and export restrictions over China’s treatment of Uyghur Muslims in the western autonomous region of Xinjiang.

Rep. Massie, the sole dissenting voice in Congress, did not vote against these bills because of any loyalty to Beijing or Xi Jinping. “When our government meddles in the internal affairs of foreign countries, it invites those governments to meddle in our affairs,” [Massie wrote on Twitter](#), explaining his votes.

[The Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative \(TAIPEI\) Act](#), which was signed into law by President Trump in March, passed unanimously through both the House and Senate, with Rep. Massie finally falling in line with his colleague’s anti-China policy. The TAIPEI Act says the US should “help strengthen Taiwan’s diplomatic relationships and partnerships around the world.”

Taiwan remains the most sensitive issue between the US and China, since Beijing considers

the island to be a part of China. Although the US does not formally recognize Taiwan as an independent nation, Washington [supplies the island with arms](#) and [frequently sails warships](#) through the Taiwan strait, drawing the ire of Beijing. No members of Congress speak out against these provocations. Like the accusations about Trump and Russia, the idea that Congress is crawling with agents of Beijing is easily disproven by actual policy.

Tucker Carlson did not challenge any of Wright's outrageous claims but instead nodded along. Since the start of the outbreak, Carlson's show has focused on putting all the blame for the coronavirus pandemic on Beijing. Carlson's recent content reflects the strategy of the White House. *The Daily Beast* [obtained internal White House documents](#) in March that showed the administration was pushing US officials to blame China for a "cover-up" in the early days of the outbreak. The strategy has proven useful as many pro-Trump media outlets put Beijing's response to the pandemic under a microscope, and largely ignore the US government's [early missteps](#).

[Politico obtained a memo](#) sent by the National Republican Senatorial Committee to GOP campaigns. [The memo](#) outlines an anti-China strategy for Republicans running for office in 2020. The document advises candidates to blame the pandemic on China, say Democratic opponents are too soft on China, and advocate for sanctions against Beijing. The memo is full of strong rhetoric like, "China is not an ally, and they're not just a rival — they are an adversary and the Chinese Communist Party is our enemy."

The GOP guidelines are similar to the [rhetoric coming from China hardliners](#) like former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon. In March 2019, Bannon and neoconservative Frank Gaffney founded the Committee on Present Danger: China, a think-tank that identifies China as the greatest "existential threat" to the United States. In his almost-daily podcast, Bannon rails against Beijing and pins all the blame for the pandemic on China. "The Chinese Communist Party is at war with their people, they're at war with the world, and they're at war with you ... You may not have an interest in the Chinese Communist Party but its destroyed your life. OK? Your economic life, your spiritual life, your social life. The destruction is from Beijing," [Bannon said in a recent episode](#).

Republicans and right-wingers are not the only ones looking to attack China this election season. The Biden campaign [released an ad](#) on April 18th that attacked Trump for his response to the virus. The ad said, "Trump rolled over for the Chinese" and criticized how much the president praised China's handling of the pandemic early on. "Trump praised the Chinese 15 times in January and February as the coronavirus spread across the world," the ad said.

The anti-China propaganda seems to be turning public opinion against Beijing. [A new poll](#) from the Pew Research Center that surveyed 1,000 adults throughout March found that 66 percent have an unfavorable view of China, an increase of 14 percent since Pew last asked the question in 2018. Nine out of 10 adults surveyed view China as a threat, including 62 percent who see China as a major threat.

China may have made some mistakes in its early response to the virus, but that does not excuse the US government's lack of preparedness, and treating the pandemic as an attack sets a dangerous precedent for future outbreaks. The strategy could backfire on Washington if any future pandemics originate in the US.

Like Russiagate, the anti-China propaganda will serve as a useful tool for a national security

state that is looking to [focus more on great power competition](#). The Pentagon [identifies China](#) as its number one priority and is looking to [increase its footprint](#) in the Indo-Pacific region. The constant propaganda will make that increased presence more palatable to the American people. But that increased presence will bring more confrontation between the US and China, and bring the region and the world closer to nuclear war.

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