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Exploring the Impact of Disinformation on the Internet on Both the Official and Unofficial  
International Relations Among States

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## **ABSTRACT**

States around the globe have always used informational warfare to their advantage, using disinformation to shape narratives and gain an upper hand in conflict. However, at the turn of the century, the informational age and rise of the internet has given states the opportunity to share disinformation at much faster speeds and reach an audience well beyond its borders. As such, rising levels of disinformation have created conditions in which international relations and diplomacy between states are directly being threatened as some states seek to push false narratives about each other which in turn creates a climate of mistrust. Relations between states, such as between Israel and other Arab states, are at risk of falling apart because of disinformation being shared on social media platforms and disinformation is accelerating rising levels of polarization between states at a time when states must be working with one another to address pressing global issues.

This thesis will argue that disinformation being perpetrated by certain states puts diplomacy between states at risk. Through an extensive analysis of how disinformation is affecting relations between Russia and the United States, China and Taiwan, and Israel and the Arab world, a common conclusion reached is that disinformation is disrupting diplomacy between these case studies, at a time when global conflict is severe.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Introductory Remarks and Background Information**

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the world has been dominated by the rise of the internet as it has gradually become a part of people's everyday lives. Today, the ability to access information has become a simple endeavor as access to social-media channels and search engines has become widespread. Overall, the internet has become a successful tool in helping people exchange ideas at record speed which has resulted in people being better informed about critical domestic and global issues. Such information has helped people in an abundance of ways such as aiding people to make choices in elections held in democratic states to helping people navigate ongoing conflict in the world's more contentious states. However, internet services, which remain mostly unregulated by the globe's major democratic powers, have become breeding grounds for false or misleading information being spread by everyday users, organizations, and even state-actors.

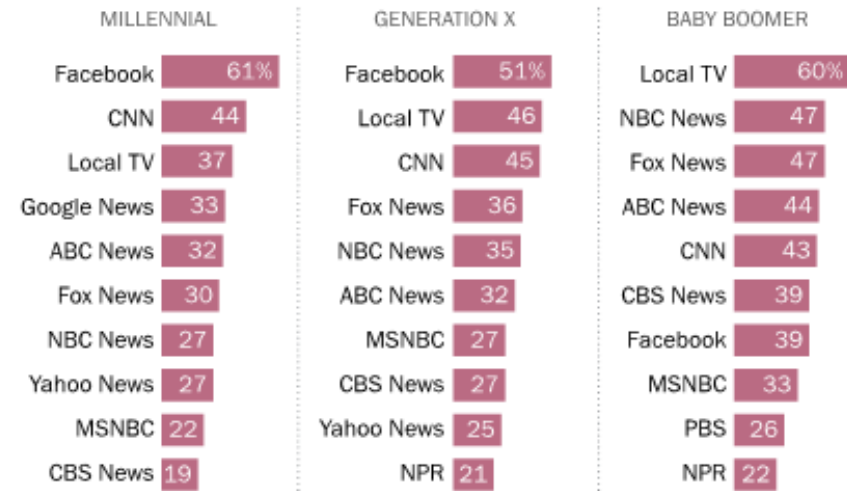
Throughout history, informational warfare had been practiced by many states and has been a useful weapon used in war for centuries (Ventre, 2016). Many states, including those in the democratic world such as the United States (US) have engaged in informational warfare in some sort and have used false information to gain the upper hand in warfare. While in the past, as spelled out by Ventre (2016), informational warfare was spread via newspapers, leaflets, and other means, today the internet has made the roll out of false information by state-actors much easier and allows states to spread disinformation to other states far from their own borders. The

internet has provided states with an opportunity to spread fake news, and this has resulted in widespread levels of false information being present on social media channels (Sinclair, 2023).

Such false information has also become a powerful tool for those who seek to intentionally shape false narratives and they have been helpful in shaping public opinion about a multitude of global issues. When the spread of false or misleading information, by state-actors in the context of this thesis, is intentional, that information is labeled disinformation (Guess et al., 2020). While misinformation, on the other hand, is usually spread unintentionally, disinformation, as argued by Guess et al. (2020), has a direct goal to deceive its audience. Additionally, spreaders of disinformation are aware that the information they are sharing is false and state-actors intentionally will echo such disinformation in pursuit of some geopolitical goal. Today, many different types of disinformation exist on almost all social media channels as states use a multitude of different ways to intentionally spread false narratives. Disinformation, as according to Fallis (2014) “includes deceptive advertising (in business and in politics), government propaganda, doctored photographs, forged documents, fake maps, internet frauds, fake websites, and manipulated Wikipedia entries” (p. 135). As such, disinformation can have detrimental effects on its audience. Disinformation can cause people to be misled about major news stories or politicians in democratic states which can affect voting patterns or election outcomes, it can also skew investment windows and can impede the ability to exchange information with each other, the very point of the internet and social media (Fallis, 2014). And this is becoming a much larger problem as more people around the globe rely on social media platforms and the internet as their sole providers of information. See **Figure 1**.

### Among Millennials, Facebook Far Exceeds Any Other Source for Political News

*% who got news about politics and government in the previous week from...*



American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q22, Q24A. Based on online adults.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

**Figure 1.** (Mitchell et al., 2015)

**Figure 1**, as pulled from a research study from the Pew Research Center, shows that millennials are increasingly relying on Facebook, as opposed to cable, to receive their news (Mitchell et al., 2015). Additionally, more currently, TikTok was the main source of news for Generation Z and Generation Z is even more likely to rely on social media to get their news than millennials are (Flynn, 2024). And as more people are given access to social media platforms, the more people are exposed, sometimes intentionally, to false or misleading information. One story on Facebook showed that Wikileaks confirmed suspicions that Hillary Clinton was responsible for funding weapon sales to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and that post had almost 800,000 Facebook users engage with it, which means they liked or shared the post (Armstrong, 2019). Additionally, Russia was known, especially during the 2016 US election season, to amplify posts like the one mentioned before, as the Kremlin preferred Donald Trump



over Hillary Clinton during the 2016 US presidential race seeing Trump as more in line with the foreign policy interests of Moscow (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017).

Additionally, larger geopolitically powerful states have resources to spare and engaging in disinformation operations is a rather inexpensive investment which rewards such states with a vast amount of critical information essential to their geopolitical goals. These state actors, according to Walton (2019), can also use such disinformation to help gather critical intelligence and can use it to assist in spying on other states, and can also use it to destabilize other states, as mentioned, through manipulation of elections and through advanced cyber-warfare operations.

As such, these narratives that are being spread by different state-actors and the public opinions being changed on many global issues because of such disinformation is beginning to have a direct effect on relations between these different states. As contentious states are increasingly engaging in information warfare on the internet, manipulating facts to achieve strategic objectives, the results of their actions are beginning to influence global geopolitics. And as different states vie for control over global narratives, many are using disinformation as a tool to reach their goals and in the process are disrupting relations with fellow states. More recently, some states have turned to targeted campaigns of disinformation to sway election results in democratic states and to spread false narratives on social media platforms aimed at manipulating public opinion to support a particular global cause deemed important by the state spreading the disinformation.

Such disinformation, for example, has been prevalent on internet channels in Ukraine, where Russia is engaging in a military invasion of the state. As the war between the Russians and Ukrainians has mostly been at a stalemate, as a result of billions of dollars being infused into the Ukrainian military by its allies, the Russians have invested quite heavily in its disinformation

operations, aimed at degrading Ukrainian domestic and international support for Ukrainian politicians and the Ukrainian central government, as well as helping the Kremlin drum up its own domestic support for the war (Erlich et al., 2023). And as tensions between Kyiv and Moscow have been heightened in recent years, especially following Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Russians have used its informational warfare machine to stoke distrust between the Russian and Ukrainian peoples and the Ukrainian armed forces which, at the time, deteriorated relations between Russia and Ukraine to new lows (Mejias et al., 2014). An example of such disinformation by Russia, as stated by Mejias et al. (2014), was when "a 2013 photo of a war victim in Syria was used in May 2014 to serve as proof that Ukrainian soldiers had wounded a 12-year-old schoolboy in Sloviansk, and later, as proof that the wounded boy was from Donetsk" (p. 1033).

Thereby, at the core of the disinformation challenge lies its huge impact on trust between different states, something that is an indispensable element of healthy dialogue and diplomacy between states. When false narratives begin to be pushed, especially by another state-actor, trust between states begins to fall apart and such disinformation campaigns are eroding confidence between governments and citizens alike. Diplomacy relies on transparent and honest communication between two governments on critical global issues and remains an integral part of twenty-first century foreign policy doctrines (Stojanovska-Stefanova et al., 2020). The very essence of diplomacy, enhanced by ideals related to liberalism, support international cooperation between states on a multitude of issues that affect humanity. These issues, such as fighting climate change, world hunger, and preventing conflict, require states to work with each other and states need to trust each other to achieve those goals. The very existence of disinformation puts efforts to collaborate at risk as the international system is already fragile and if states begin to

mistrust each other, that can threaten efforts to move forward as an international community (Wrighton, 2022). As such, the erosion of trust between states because of disinformation has the broader threat of destabilizing the international order. In a century where digital information shapes public perception, these orchestrated campaigns have the potential to escalate regional conflicts and even strain already existing alliances which was the case when Russian disinformation put at risk Turkey's relations with its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies. Moscow did this by amplifying disinformation tactics aimed at swaying the Turkish public and Turkish politicians against ratifying Sweden's accession into NATO (McGrath et al., 2023). Such pushback led Turkey to hold off on ratifying Sweden's acceptance into NATO which strained the US-Turkish alliance, as having Sweden in the alliance was a main goal of Washington. Misleading narratives also can stoke nationalist sentiments and fuel public outrage over a particular global issue or against a fellow state. Furthermore, the manipulation of public opinion on a global scale can not only intensify existing conflict but can also help hamper the prospects for a peaceful resolution to any dispute between governments as public opinion on conflicts that the public's state is engaged in is usually dependent on if a state invests in diplomacy to end such conflict or not.

All in all, in the modern era of global communication, it is becoming clear that the pervasive influence of disinformation on international relations is rapidly becoming a formidable force, eroding relationships, and stoking mistrust between states. This research aims to analyze the impact disinformation on the internet, including found on prominent social media platforms, is having on both the official diplomatic and informal relations of three case studies laid out in the subsequent chapters. This thesis' first case study is between Russia and the US. Recently, the relationship between Russia and the US has deteriorated to new lows following the Russian

invasion of Ukraine. As the conflict drags on, the relationship is being put to further stress tests as the Russian disinformation machine is well-funded and actively interfering in American domestic politics to push a pro-Russian message at a time when American tax dollars are going toward the Ukrainian armed forces. US-Russian relations have also been affected by Russian disinformation efforts, as mentioned, aimed at swaying US elections in favor of candidates that Moscow feels would be better aligned with their interests. This thesis' second case study examines the relationship between the People's Republic of China (China) and the island of Taiwan, a relationship that is increasingly being seen as becoming a geopolitical flashpoint in the near future. Chinese-Taiwanese relations have been tense since the founding of communist rule on mainland China and the retreat of the pre-communist Chinese government to the island of Taiwan. As tensions grow between the two in the twenty-first century, correlated to Chinese President Xi Jinping's consolidation of power, China has invested a considerable amount into its disinformation operations aimed at forcing the island to accept eventual reunification with the mainland but has succeeded in driving a wedge between Beijing and Taipei by attempting to paint the Taiwanese government in a negative light. Lastly, this thesis' third case study looks into how disinformation, mostly under the guise of the currently ongoing war in Gaza City, has had an effect on relations between the state of Israel and the Arab world, including with the Palestinian territories. Israeli-Arab relations have always been shaky and the disinformation, because of the war, that has been perpetrated by many different international actors puts at risk diplomatic progress Israel has made with the Arab world and threatens prolonging the war currently ongoing in Gaza City. As such, in an era where information is both a tool for cooperation and a weapon for manipulation, understanding the dynamics of disinformation is paramount for preserving the integrity of international relations. Going forward, this thesis' case

studies will aim to provide historical context behind how disinformation has affected these states' relationships in the past and offer analysis on how disinformation, on the internet, has shaped the more modern relations each of these states has with each other.

### **Review of Literature**

As social media usage rises globally, more studies are alluding to a direct correlation with rising levels of disinformation being perpetrated by state actors. As such, the area of study is fairly new as the internet is a new but evolving phenomenon, but academics have already invested some research into how such disinformation has affected diplomacy between different states. Many pieces of literature reckon with how disinformation affects international relations as a whole and only some of the literature dives into specific case studies between two states and how such relations had been affected by disinformation. Bjola (2019) points out that Russian disinformation was responsible for Donald Trump's upset against Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US election. A common theme throughout the literature, Russia has perfected its disinformation operations, and the Russian disinformation programs effectiveness has been felt in many states across the globe (Bjola, 2019; Powers et al., 2017). Russia has also been responsible, as alluded to by Bjola (2019) in disinformation efforts impeding in the domestic politics of Spain, France, and the United Kingdom with an aim to sow discord and amplify social tensions, tensions with potentially destabilizing results. The American response to Russian disinformation, which is operated within US social media channels, has mostly involved identifying and debunking disinformation but has also led to more official diplomatic spats between Moscow and Washington if disinformation is shared by official diplomats or by official entities with ties to the

Kremlin (Bjola, 2019). Powers et al. (2017) shows that disinformation efforts by state actors usually have some strategic objective in that the goals of disinformation operations by state actors such as Russia and China aim to shape the behavior of an adversarial states' government. Artificial Intelligence (AI), while still in its early stages, can also arise as a possibility in interfering with diplomacy in that AI would make it easier for state actors to amplify fake images and videos which may be believed by more people (Powers et al., 2017). Additionally, Powers et al. (2017) identifies fact checking as any government's critical resource in pushing back against disinformation coming from adversaries and suggests that governments should double down on investment in fact checking to prevent the further spread of disinformation. Lanoszka (2019) details concrete steps international organizations have taken to try and combat rising levels of disinformation however he argues that its particularly difficult for disinformation to have any profound effects on diplomacy between states. But Lanoszka (2019) specifies that some states do overcome what he calls "powerful obstacles" (p. 1) and are successful in their goals to shake up domestic political discourse resulting in swift backlash from the state interfered with. China and Russia have been ahead of a lot of states in the western world when it comes to using information on the internet to its advantage and such efforts through disinformation have had a global outreach (Manfredi, 2024). Such global outreach has caused rifts in the Russian relationships with other NATO states and has heightened tension between the Chinese and US governments, as both states vie for geopolitical dominance of the South China Sea (Manfredi, 2024). All in all, the literature is clear that disinformation exists on social media channels and that its effects can be sometimes far-reaching and can have detrimental effects on the relations between different states as states increasingly are trying to keep each other in check while the popularity of the internet soars. However, there is a gap in the literature as much of the literature

fails to make more direct connections of instances of disinformation having an effect on relations between states.

## **Methodology**

Going forward, this thesis' case studies will focus on direct examples of how instances of disinformation has had an effect on relations between two states. Throughout this thesis, there are figures which serve as direct examples of disinformation found on social media channels and the provided commentary not only explains the figure but provides a direct connection to a diplomatic spat that was a result of the disinformation shown. As mentioned, this thesis will explore the relations between Russia and the US, China and Taiwan, and Israel and the Arab world as these examples are all prevalent relationships that have been in the spotlight in recent years. Literature provides many instances of diplomatic rifts because of disinformation between the US and Russia and the Russian disinformation machine has been a topic of study for many western academics as it is widespread and powerful. Chinese-Taiwanese relations is another pivotal relationship that will remain at the forefront into the near future and has increasingly been examined by academics. Lastly, the Israeli-Arab relationship is currently in the forefront of the news from late 2023 into 2024 as the war in Gaza City rages on. Case studies were chosen for the presentation of information as they allowed for an in-depth, detailed examination into specific instances of disinformation influencing diplomacy between states. This in-depth dive into the information has allowed for direct connections between disinformation and diplomatic rifts to be made in many different circumstances.

The information within this thesis was found throughout the internet and social media channels. Many of the figures themselves were found directly on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok but were also pulled from existing literature and news articles. Through use of online encyclopedias, scholarly literature was found to enhance the arguments made in this thesis' case studies but the direct instances were found on more contemporary news websites such as from the Cable News Network (CNN), National Broadcasting Company (NBC), Associated Press, as well as newspapers such as the New York Times and Wall Street Journal. For other case studies, news sources based in other states, such as Israel, Taiwan, and other Arab states, the latter being mostly from news sources as the war in Gaza City is currently ongoing and new information is being released every day. In the subsequent chapters, this thesis will aim to use the information collected to make clear arguments of how some relations between states have mostly deteriorated due to disinformation operations and will comment on some mitigation strategies some states are taking to fight disinformation.



## **Chapter 2**

### **The United States and Russia**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter, my first case study which involves the US-Russian relationship, will touch upon the historical, but focus on the contemporary diplomacy between both states and how in recent years, that relationship has fell apart. Through a coordinated disinformation campaign, Russia has hijacked the information age and has been flooding American internet servers with pro-Russian propaganda filtered through Kremlin-backed organizations. While the former-Soviet Union and the early Russian Federation have a long history of interference in American domestic affairs using disinformation, the phenomenon became widely well-known during and following the 2016 US presidential election in which Russia executed a large-scale operation to sway the election in a way that they thought would benefit Russian foreign policy interests (Walton, 2019). Following the election, Russia expanded its operations and has perfected ways in which Russian allies infiltrate American social media channels to create tension and attempt to manipulate American voters in ways that would make them more in line with pro-Russian positions on numerous domestic and international issues. Such interference in American political affairs has incited a strong American response through official diplomatic channels and has led to a divide in relations that is being felt even today. Currently, Russia has used its capability to spread Russian propaganda regarding the current war being fought between Russia and Ukraine wherein the US and western allies have continuously provided billions of dollars in aid to the Ukrainians as of the end of 2023 (US Department of State, 2023). As American aid continues to

provide Ukrainian forces with a lifeline, Russian internet trolls and bots, as according to Geissler et al. (2023) have been successful creating accounts on American social media platforms designed to spread disinformation about the war as the US provides Ukraine with the aid it needs to contain the Russian armed forces. Going forward, this chapter will discuss the historical context behind Russian disinformation in the US and how that has led to the culture of fake news as seen today, Russian cyber operations using disinformation, how Russia has hijacked American domestic politics and swayed public opinion on important geopolitical issues, Russian interference in American elections, and the impact Russian disinformation is having on American alliances which are currently jointly backing Ukraine in its fight against Russia.

### **Historical Context**

The US-Russian relationship has long been complicated and Russian disinformation being used as an informational weapon against the US has a long history. As such, tensions between the US and Russia's precursor, the Soviet Union, began to brew in the months following the fall of Nazi Germany as both states' post-war plans were severely contrasting. In the years after the end of World War Two, the Cold War between the two superpowers began and with this new war came a new way to fight wars: through information. As the Cold War never spiraled into a direct confrontation between the American and Soviet militaries, the war was mainly fought through proxy wars, arms races, and ultimately through information (JFK Library). The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), as Rid (2020) indicates, referred to the exchange of disinformation as political warfare which aimed to build upon existing political tension in both states' domestic bodies through use of misleading information and fake news. As the success of

these disinformation campaigns was apparent, both states, the Soviet Union especially, began official efforts by intelligence operatives to use informational warfare to gain a geopolitical upper hand (Rid, 2020).

Furthermore, at times, such official Soviet disinformation created a situation in which official US-Soviet relations were damaged. One such instance, as spelled out by Cull et al. (2017) involves a scheme in which Soviet disinformation agents, backed by the Kremlin, attempted to spread a conspiracy that the CIA and US armed forces created acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, also known as AIDS, to be used as a bio weapon to discredit the agency and sway vulnerable 'swing states,' as in states dangling between communism and capitalism, during the Cold War to align themselves with the Soviet Union. This development created a diplomatic spat between the Reagan Administration and Kremlin leaders in which the US government threatened to hit the Soviets with sanctions and such disinformation threatened to torpedo a planned high stakes meeting between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev (Cull et al., 2017). Cull et al. (2017) also acknowledges that American officials threatened to pull out of Soviet collaboration on research to curb the spread of AIDS and used diplomatic channels to threaten the Soviets that highly desirable American research concerning AIDS would be cut off and the Kremlin eventually pulled back. Such instances were seen all throughout the Cold War as America's foreign policy strategy dangled between containment of communism and détente, but as the time progressed and information began being shared at higher speeds, the Soviet disinformation machine grew stronger.

While the Cold War began to slow in the late 1980s, and finally end with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly formed Russian Federation, which acquired most of the Soviet Union's former assets, began its own informational war. Showing this, Cull et al. (2017) cites an

instance in late 1992 where the newly formed Russian Foreign Intelligence Service created a fake document which claimed that the US military was going to continue to work with apartheid South Africa in an attempt to discredit the American government. Moreover, at the turn of the century, the internet started to become a widespread phenomenon, connecting billions of people across the globe with each other and allowing for information to be easily and quickly exchanged. With the rise of the internet however came the start of the Russians using it as a new medium to spread pro-Kremlin propaganda at new lengths. As such, the Russians also perfected its use of disinformation on an international stage, which they usually deployed during an internationally unpopular Russian phenomenon, such as when Russia's started its involvement in Georgia in 2008. Additionally, Paul (2016) argues that:

Since its 2008 incursion into Georgia (if not before), there has been a remarkable evolution in Russia's approach to propaganda... ..this propaganda includes text, video, audio, and still imagery propagated via the Internet, social media, satellite television, and traditional radio and television broadcasting. (para.1-7)

During this time, the US-Russian relationship was experiencing changeability with American presidents carefully trying to hold Russia accountable for actions that violated international law, such as when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, while also balancing keeping American-Russian relations afloat in some capacity. However, the threat of Russian meddling in American domestic affairs, through use of disinformation, burst into the American political spotlight during the 2016 presidential election and has continued to remain a formidable force in American politics prompting swift and harsh responses from the US diplomatic officials.

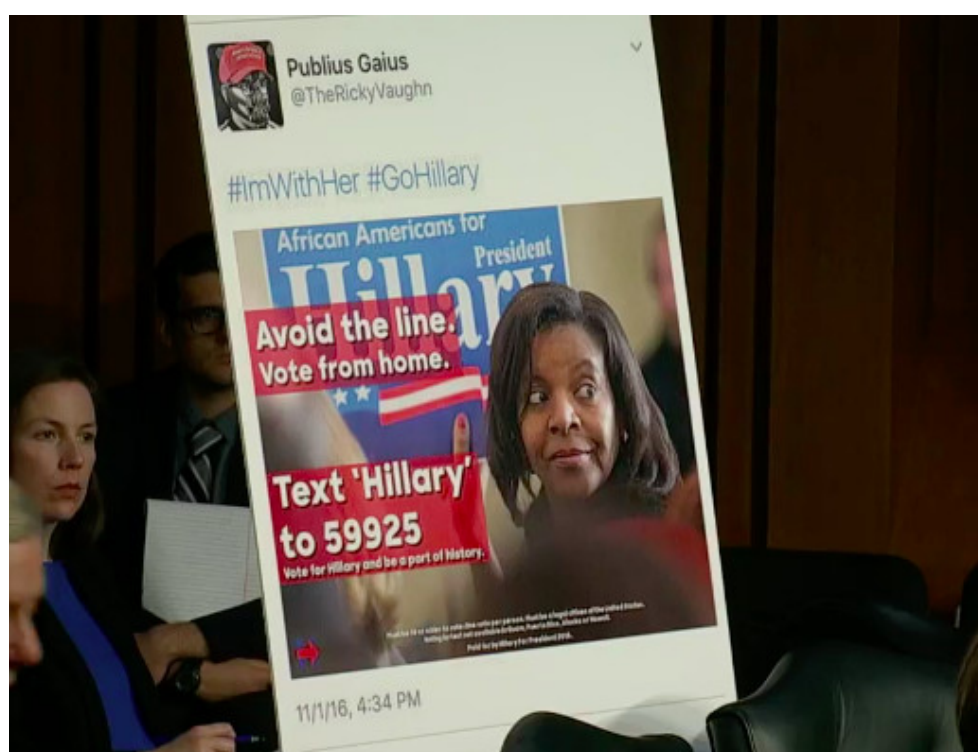
The relationship today has deteriorated to a new low following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and, more consequently, because of continued Russian meddling into American

domestic affairs, as the world's two largest nuclear powers have cut off almost all diplomatic communications (Sokolsky, 2023). As such, the Russian informational war against the US continues as Russia sees its disinformation campaign as a successful tool to counter American hegemony.

### **Russian Interference in American Elections**

There are numerous ways through which Russia can involve itself into American domestic politics. As such, in recent years, Russia has found using disinformation to be a useful strategy to interfere in American politics, namely into American elections. As mentioned, this Russian meddling began to be highlighted during and after the 2016 presidential election, where reality television star and businessman Donald Trump defeated former-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in one of the largest election upsets in modern American history. The Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election, more commonly known as the Mueller Report, highlighted the extent of Russian involvement into the election and probed whether the Trump campaign directly colluded with Russian officials. The report found that there was a high confidence across the US intelligence community that Russia interfered in the US election through social media channels, where Russian entities pushed pro-Trump messages and suppressed pro-Clinton messages and through more official routes wherein Russian intelligence officials conducted cyber operations against the Clinton campaign and against Democratic National Committee (DNC) networks and computers (Mueller, 2019). The report further found that Russian operations on social media was executed by members of the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a Kremlin-backed organization that specializes in online

disinformation campaigns (Bastos, 2019). The IRA used tactics to brew tension between America's political parties and used American social media platforms to push pro-Trump messages as Vladimir Putin and his advisors preferred a Trump presidency over a potential Clinton presidency. During the election season, the IRA also took steps to confuse American voters by persuading some voters to stay home or to vote from their cellphones, an invalid way to vote (Wagner, 2017). **See Figure 2.**



**Figure 2.** (Wagner, 2017).

**Figure 2** and many other posts were submitted by Meta, which owns Facebook and submitted by Twitter, which today is known as X, to the US Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism. It was shown that thousands of fake accounts flooded Facebook and Twitter with politically charged messages aiming to influence public opinion and undermine faith in the electoral process. The misinformation campaign reached millions of Americans, contributing to an atmosphere of polarization and mistrust during the election cycle (Office of

the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), 2017). Eady et al. (2023) specifically points out, through a review of government reports, that estimates show that around 32 million Twitter users and 126 million Facebook users were exposed to Russian-linked propaganda spread by the IRA in the months leading up to November of 2016. Following the revelation that the IRA directly interfered in the democratic process, US-Russian relations, then under the Barack Obama Administration fell to a new low. In response to mounting intelligence from Congressional Committees and from the intelligence community, the White House responded by instituting sanctions against Russian intelligence services and officials, directed the State Department to shut down Russian compounds in New York and Maryland, and banned some Russian officials from traveling into the US (Office of the Press Secretary, 2016).

In addition to the army of bots and trolls employed by the IRA to infiltrate social media channels, the Mueller Report, as mentioned, also found evidence of more direct involvement by the Kremlin into cyber operations which invaded DNC servers and hacked into the Clinton campaign. Before the election, hackers associated with the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Army (GRU) hacked into the emails of Clinton's campaign staffers, including John Podesta, her campaign chairman, and stole and leaked hundreds of thousands of documents taken from the DNC's private servers through affiliates such as WikiLeaks (Mueller, 2019). The Department of Justice responded to this information by pursuing charges against twelve Russian intelligence officers for attempting to subvert the American democratic process and the indictment of those officers put pressure on then-President Donald Trump to cancel a planned summit between him and Vladimir Putin, however Trump refused to do so (Shabad, 2018). Additionally, as President Obama took steps to punish Russia for their interference into the 2016 election, the Trump Administration took a more measured approach against the

Russians. During the 2016 election, the Mueller Report noted that while there was no evidence of direct collusion between Trump and Russian officials, Trump did indirectly welcome the news that Russia was discrediting Hillary Clinton and helping his campaign (Mueller, 2019). As such, during Trump's presidency, relations between the US and Russia mostly experienced détente. As the 2020 election season heated up, Trump was famous for jokingly telling Putin during a meeting to "not meddle in the US election" (Baker et al., 2019) and he continuously took warnings from his own intelligence officials about Russian hacking operations into the 2020 election with a grain of salt.

While the 2016 presidential election may have directly highlighted Russian interference in American elections publicly, the hacking, according to American intelligence, continued into the 2020 presidential election. A 2021 report following the election found that Russia had again attempted to influence the American presidential election through both official and unofficial means as they thought four more years of a Trump Administration would be more friendly to Russian foreign policy interests, however its operation was not as widescale as the operations during the 2016 election (National Intelligence Council, 2021). Following this report, the Joe Biden Administration, which vowed to take a harder stance on Russia during the campaign, directly sanctioned Russian intelligence members and expelled ten diplomats from the Russian Mission in New York, as the revelation cut into the US-Russian relationship at a time when tension was beginning to rise due to Russian military buildup around Ukraine (The White House, 2021).

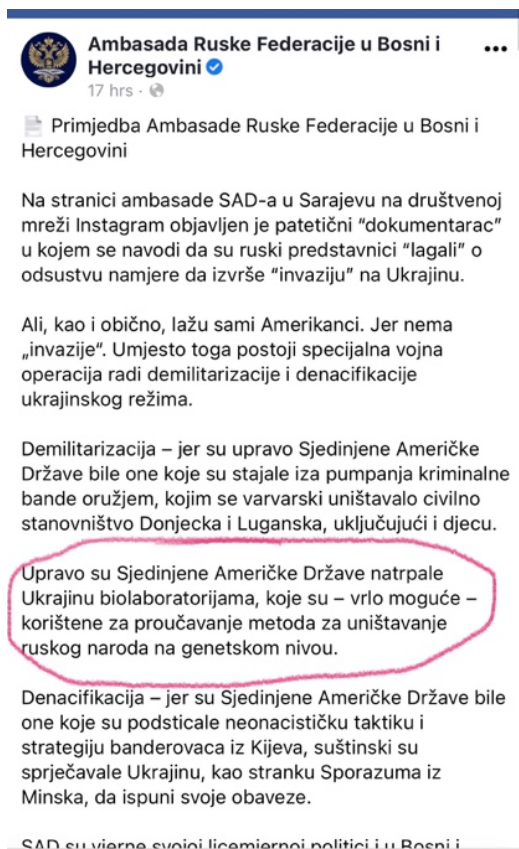


## **Russian-Ukraine War**

In late 2022, Russia began its invasion into Ukrainian territory in what has become Europe's largest war since the Second World War. In the months leading up to the Russian invasion, Russia mobilized troops and equipment and lined the Russian-Ukrainian border with military reinforcements as the US and its NATO allies attempted to convince Vladimir Putin to stand down. However, Putin doubled down and began his invasion into Ukrainian territory which was met with swift backlash from the West. Additionally, as Putin began the invasion, the US and NATO began an operation of aiding and arming the Ukrainian military with the resources it needs to fight the Russian armed forces and to date, the US and its allies have provided almost 178 billion dollars in funding to Ukraine which has allowed it to fight the better equipped Russian army (Institute for the Study of War, 2024). As such, Armstrong (2023) indicates that the US has provided the most in military aid to Ukraine and has allowed Ukraine access to high tech American-made weapons to fight the Russian army and such an alliance drives a wedge between what was supposed to be an easy, swift invasion of Ukraine by the Russians. As such, thwarting continuous US aid has been a top priority to the Russians and since the war began, the Russians have severely stepped up their disinformation campaigns against the US and allies and has been using its disinformation machine to one, try and persuade American and allied audiences of the disadvantages to supporting Ukraine and two, to try and break the unity between NATO states as they try to provide Ukraine with the weapons it needs to beat back the Russians.

Since the start of the war, Russia has used its disinformation operation to try and ferment conspiracy theories which are designed to shake up American domestic politics. Like its operations during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, Russia has turned to American social

media accounts to try and persuade audiences to favor Russia in a more positive light. Using both official and unofficial accounts on social media platforms with little content moderation such as Twitter and TikTok, the Russian government has been able to spread falsehoods like claiming that the US has secret bioweapon labs in Ukraine. See **Figure 3**.



**Figure 3.** (Russian Embassy in Bosnia on Twitter, 2022).

The circled part of **Figure 3**, which was posted to the official Russian Embassy to Bosnia’s account on Twitter, can be translated as saying, “The U.S. has just crammed Ukraine with biolabs, which – quite possible – were used to study methods for the destruction of the Russian people at the genetic level” (Google Translate). This claim which was picked up by far-rightest audiences in the US, were used by Members of the US Congress who are against funding the war in Ukraine, to argue against arming the Ukrainians against Russia even though the US

government, the United Nations, and other experts say there is no concrete evidence behind these claims and that they are a part of the Russian campaign to sway public opinion in Russia's favor making it politically infeasible for the Biden Administration to ask for funding (Qiu, 2022). This specific instance on the claim of US-funded bioweapons in Ukraine put at risk diplomatic negotiations between the US, Russia and other international players working under the backdrop of a global summit looking to renew commitments strengthening the Biological Weapons Convention. Following that tweet and others like it coming from official Russian diplomatic accounts, American health experts were nervous that the summit would be used as a platform by the Russians to sow distrust in the US and Ukraine by spreading health conspiracies like the bio-lab claim. As such, when the summit occurred, Russian claims of American bioweapons in Ukraine derailed negotiations between the major powers on the real issue at hand and further deteriorated the already strained US-Russia diplomatic relationship (Lentzos et al., 2023).

As mentioned, another major goal of the Russian government is to try and use disinformation to try sway the American public against providing direct aid to Ukraine. As Russia has been particularly angry with the influx of support the US Congress has authorized to Ukraine, it has been a top priority of Putin's to try and curb US aid. While Putin may not believe that he could completely end all American support for Ukraine, Barnes (2023) notes that "Russians may believe they can stir up enough debate over Ukraine aid that a future Congress could find it more difficult to pass additional support" (para. 16). As such, aid to Ukraine has been held up in Congress in the months heading into 2024 and it's uncertain whether Ukraine will ever even receive aid that it has requested because of the opposition of some in Congress. As a bill to aid Ukraine has support in the US Senate, the US House of Representatives is unlikely to

pass any bill that funds Ukraine as far-right factions are opposed to authorizing any more money to Ukraine (Groves et al., 2024).

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its information war that followed, US-Russian relations hit a new low and the states have refrained from direct diplomatic engagement since the war began (Graham, 2023). However, the US government has taken up new strategies to try and fight Russian disinformation while both states have mostly cut off diplomatic channels. In the US, as it's politically unpopular for the Biden Administration to ask social media channels to take down Russian disinformation, the Administration has taken new steps to fight disinformation which Bose (2022) indicates involves declassifying intelligence reports of Russian disinformation operations and using the intelligence community to flag any post it finds to be Russian disinformation found on social media. Since 2022, the US has essentially been releasing information that is designed to preempt any Russian release of disinformation using agencies such as the State Department's Global Engagement Center and has been working with, instead of censoring social media companies to rid their platforms and provide ways to flag information that is proven to be disinformation. Such incidents of disinformation infiltrating internet servers have not only raised concerns about the security of critical infrastructure but have also contributed to a climate of distrust, hindering diplomatic efforts to address other geopolitical issues between the US and Russia (Ashmore, 2008), which may include efforts to end the war in Ukraine or more comprehensive diplomatic negotiations over things like arms control. And as Russian disinformation continues to target American audiences, and the war between Ukraine and Russia rages on, relations between the US and Russia have completely collapsed and the hopes of a resolution to the conflict in Ukraine, for now, are gone.

## **US Relations With Allies**

Another area of concern that has been highlighted is the impact that Russian disinformation has on US relations with its allies, especially as NATO struggles to keep a united response against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russian disinformation poses a threat to American alliances in that it exploits internal divisions and creates mistrust among allies. By disseminating misleading narratives that target specific states or institutions, Russia seeks to weaken the cohesion of NATO and strain American diplomatic relationships with other states. The spread of disinformation can lead to doubts about the reliability of intelligence and intentions, eroding the foundation of trust upon which alliances are built. Furthermore, if Russian disinformation contributes to internal strife within allied nations, it may impede coordinated responses to shared challenges, thereby undermining the effectiveness and unity of American alliances. Russian disinformation was seen on display when NATO began the process of admitting Finland and Sweden to the bloc, a longtime goal of American military strategists at the dismay of Vladimir Putin. Daragahi (2022) argued that:

Across the bloc, in states where years of Kremlin narratives have been promoted through sympathetic media and political figures, doubts are coming to the foreground. That could complicate plans to quickly incorporate Finland and Sweden into NATO within the next several months. (para. 7)

And it exactly has, with Turkey and Hungary, Russia's closer NATO allies, halting the process for months until Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan surprisingly allowed his country to ratify their membership and has moved forward to ratify Swedish membership. During the process however, American alliances with Hungary and Turkey became strained, a longtime goal

of Vladimir Putin as he looks to divide NATO over the Ukraine War. US intelligence, as pointed out by Rubsamen (2023) has recognized this threat and has argued that Russian attempts to damage US alliances represents one of the most serious threats to the US and they're doing it through disinformation to destroy American credibility and to try and drive a wedge between the US and Europe, which have remained united in their response to the Ukraine invasion.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, Russian disinformation has profoundly damaged US-Russian relations by exacerbating existing mistrust and widening ideological rifts. The manipulation of information to sow discord has fueled a cycle of suspicion and retaliation between the two states. While the war of information has been fought between the US and Russia since the days of the Cold War, the 2016 US presidential election interference exposed the vulnerability of democratic processes to Russian influence in the modern world, leading to heightened tensions and diplomatic fallout. Furthermore, Russia's continued dissemination of false narratives during their invasion of Ukraine has further strained relations between the US and Russia making it hard for the two nuclear powers to collaborate on important issues such as arms control. Going forward, addressing the impact of Russian disinformation requires a multifaceted approach that includes strengthening cybersecurity and an active relationship between the US government and social media companies to try and thwart any Russian efforts to involve itself in American domestic politics and in American relations with its allies.

## **Chapter 3**

### **China and Taiwan**

#### **Introduction**

In today's geopolitical atmosphere, one must look to East Asia to find one of the world's most tense relationships shared between China and Taiwan. This thesis' second case study examines how China has perfected its war of disinformation over its former territory of Taiwan and how China uses its rising global power and subsequently, its growing disinformation machine, to lure the island into supporting eventual reunification with the mainland. And as China continues down its path of growing personalist authoritarianism centered around President Xi Jinping and Taiwan's democracy continues to flourish, the split between the two could not be clearer. However, China, with the upper hand in geopolitical power, is fortunate enough to enjoy more resources and capabilities as it uses its assets to target Taiwanese democracy. Like Russian interference in American domestic politics, China uses disinformation tactics to tap into the Taiwanese public, pushing pro-China messaging and spreading falsehoods about the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), known for its anti-China stance on political issues and even Taiwanese allies such as the US and its partners in the South China Sea. Interference in Taiwanese elections, including in the most recent election held in January 2024 (Lau, 2024), continues to be the 'crown jewel' of China's disinformation operation where Chinese officials see openings to help the opposition, the more pro-Beijing, Kuomintang Party (KMT). China has also used disinformation in an effort to drive a wedge between Taiwanese institutions and the public, as well as between the Taiwanese people themselves, in an attempt to polarize the public and make

it harder for the Taiwanese government to govern (Tatsumi et al., 2019). Overall, a central goal of Beijing? To push Taiwanese public opinion to favor reunification with the mainland through a diplomatic fashion, a move likely to lead to the erosion of democratic values in Taiwan like the Chinese crackdowns on Hong Kong's democracy (Jett, 2024). As such, China's disinformation machine has made it difficult for the ruling DPP party in Taipei and the Chinese government in Beijing to make meaningful strides to coexist and has decimated cross-strait relations. Chinese relations with other important regional partners, such as the US, have also been hindered because of their disinformation campaign and abundance of misinformation on social media channels which have made tensions high in the South China Sea between all intermediaries. This chapter will proceed to discuss the historical context of the Chinese-Taiwanese relationship and instances of disinformation by both Taiwan and China before the digital age, the impact Chinese-sponsored disinformation had on the Taiwan's elections, including the 2024 Taiwanese general election, the broader regional implications of Chinese disinformation, and how China has used its tactics to attempt to influence public opinion in Taiwan, all instances in which diplomatic relations between Taiwan, China, and regional partners were put at threat as a result of falsehoods being spread by China and non-state partners.

### **Historical Context**

The using of propaganda to weaken the other has long been embedded within China-Taiwan relations and both sides, through history, have been engaged in a war using propaganda. Overall, the relationship between the two had been tense since the establishment of Taiwan following the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War. Following the war, as discussed by Li (2019),



the Chinese Communist Party established themselves on the mainland and drove the nationalist KMT party to Taiwan where they established their own authority, enforced through martial law, where Taiwan remained a one-party state until democratic reforms at the latter end of the century. For decades, both sides claimed to be the legitimate government of all of China, exacerbating tensions across the Taiwanese Strait. As such, throughout much of the twentieth century, the propaganda battle was not one sided, with both authoritarian states taking propaganda shots at each other, using disinformation in an attempt to discredit the opposing side. Both Beijing and Taipei, used intense propaganda campaigns to shape how public opinion in their respective states viewed the opposing side with much of both the Chinese and Taiwanese public developing negative views on each other which hindered relations between both states.

In Taiwan, Taipei's propaganda machine, which was used from its founding to the 1990s, was responsible for brewing domestic discord with the Chinese mainland, where Rawnsley (1999) describes instances of government-sponsored newsletters referring to, "the 'gangsters' (a familiar term used in reference to the Chinese Communists, suggesting the illegality of their power and the brutality of their methods) as 'inhuman and devoid of all moral scruples'" (p. 84). Such language caused much of the Taiwanese public to resist reunification with the mainland and contributed to beliefs that both mainland China and Taiwan could not co-exist with each other which prevented any concrete diplomatic steps to be taken between China and Taiwan to ease tension (Rawnsley, 1999). However, at the end of the twentieth century, Taiwan made meaningful democratic reforms and has transformed itself into a full-fledged democracy. Such reforms ended much of the KMT state-sponsored media which drove a wedge between Chinese-Taiwanese relations and the Taiwanese propaganda machine ceased to exist (Li, 2019).

On the other hand, the Chinese Communist Party used its own form of propaganda techniques toward what Chinese officials dub the ‘Taiwan Issue.’ Following the establishment of the island government, the Chinese government made it a goal to convince its own population of the need to reunify Taiwan with the mainland under a unified Communist government and it succeeded with a majority of mainland Chinese citizens being opposed to the independence of Taiwan (Fu, 1996). Through use of state control over media, the Chinese Communist Party was successful in lobbying its people against Taiwan using images and such of a strong, unified mainland against a Taiwan backed by the US and western allies (Powell et al., 1997). See **Figure 4.**



**Figure 4.** (Powell et al., 1997).

**Figure 4**, from 1976, is shown, according to Powell et al. (1997), to be a unified Communist Chinese front propelling toward Taiwan where “party propaganda depicted the

people of Taiwan as poverty-stricken and suffering under American exploitation, with women turned into prostitutes. Taiwan's economic success was concealed" (p. 789). Furthermore, in **Figure 4**, the text can be translated as claiming that China should reunite Taiwan with the mainland and suggests that Taiwan should be liberated from its oppressors (Powell et al., 1997). Such instances of propaganda made it difficult for cross-strait relations to flourish and deepened tension between China and Taiwan as the Chinese public took a particular disdain for the island nation. Such efforts also later backfired on some Communist Party officials who were realists in support of maintaining the status quo of Taiwan being apart from China. This came as the mass public was in support of reunification and largely against diplomatic talks between Taiwanese and Chinese officials throughout the reign of Mao Zedong and in the years following his death (Fu, 1996). Beijing also took to some more unconventional measures to wage psychological warfare on the Taiwanese in the absence of the digital world. The Chinese turned to dropping leaflets in Taiwanese-controlled areas, some of which were full of pro-China and even anti-US propaganda designed to turn the Taiwanese public against its own government and in support of reunification with mainland China (Huang, 2020).

Following the establishment of Taiwan's democracy, and the beginning of the DPP, Taiwanese Chinese relations remained inconsistent, with the DPP taking a tougher stance on China and the KMT taking a softer stance. As such, through the beginning of the twenty-first century, both sides were able to sign an Economic Framework Agreement aimed at strengthening economic ties between the two sides and keeping diplomatic channels open (Brown et al., 2019). However, as Brown et al. (2019) points out, relations began to deteriorate as Chinese President Xi Jinping began to consolidate his power over mainland China and made reunification with Taiwan, through military means, if necessary, a priority and as Taiwan's DPP developed a strong

anti-China view and aligned itself with western powers most notably with the US President Xi has also turned to the internet and has taken a chapter out of Mao's playbook to enhance China's disinformation and propaganda war against Taiwan by funding a massive disinformation operation aimed at swaying Taiwanese public opinion and manipulating its elections all in support of a pro-Beijing stance on issues China sees as important.

### **Chinese Interference in Taiwanese Elections**

As mentioned, one of the foremost ways today that China interjects itself into Taiwanese domestic politics is through manipulation of Taiwan's elections. China sees Taiwan's elections as an opportunity to flood the island with disinformation in support of reunification and in support of the pro-Chinese KMT. Beginning in around 2007, mainland China began its new era of disinformation tactics against Taiwan through use of the internet and social media carriers which were beginning to become prominent (Huang, 2020). Aside from Taiwan, China had also begun disinformation operations in many adversarial states, including the US, in an effort to flood internet waves with pro-Beijing content. In Taiwan, as spelled out by Huang (2020), China for example, propagated a false story claiming that Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-Wen's doctoral degree was falsified and faked to win an election. Social media channels in Taiwan were flooded with reports that Ing-Wen's education was fabricated by her and DPP in an attempt to raise anti-China sentiment among Taiwan's population and the story was amplified during the 2020 election when Ing-Wen was in a close battle with her KMT opposition candidate. This interference in Taiwan's democratic process was designed to prop up public dissatisfaction

with Ing-Wen, an outspoken critic of Beijing, and was an attempt to aid the KMT which were in the opposition and behind in polls during that moment (Huang, 2020).

In response to this instance, along with many other specific instances of Chinese disinformation stories about Taiwanese government officials intended to sway any elections, Taiwan's legislature passed, according to Aspinwall (2020), a new law aimed at countering Chinese disinformation and influence in Taiwan's elections, which was dubbed the Anti-Infiltration Act. The act, which was supported by DPP but opposed by KMT aims to strengthen penalties against Chinese officials or allies that try to influence Taiwan's election operations in an unlawful way, including through use of disinformation. The law, which doesn't mention China but alludes to their operations, introduces stiff fines and prison time for foreign nationals found trying to influence any election or lobby public officials in support of a foreign government's interests (Aspinwall, 2020). Furthermore, the law, according to Lee et al. (2019), "further strains [diplomatic] relations between Taiwan and Beijing... ..[China responded by claiming that] the DPP was seeking electoral gain from the move and creating enmity across the Taiwan Strait" (para. 3-8). Brief instances such as this fuel an already tense situation between China and Taiwan, one that could eventually spill into a regional military conflict between the two and other powerful regional players.

China has also looked to use economic pressure on Taiwan after Taiwan amps up pressure on China to halt its disinformation operations. This particular instance was seen in 2022 when China ended tariff cuts on chemical imports from Taiwan, a blow to the Taiwanese economy, in response to harsh rhetoric from the DPP on the threat of Chinese disinformation tactics during an election year, tactics that DPP officials argue threaten the islands national security (Nikkei Asia, 2022). Despite tension, mainland China is one of Taiwan's largest

economic markets and China has used its economic power in an attempt to keep Taiwan in line with its values. In this instance, under the excuse of accusing Taiwan of violating a trade agreement, Beijing tried using economic coercion to lighten rhetoric coming from Taiwan's DPP politicians and as tensions spiral, both sides seem less likely to support a peaceful co-existence with each other.

More recently, Chinese disinformation was very prevalent in the most recent Taiwanese general election held in January of 2024. In recent years, the ruling DPP and President Tsai Ing-Wen had doubled down on their anti-China stance by consolidating the little alliances Taiwan has left with mostly central American states, refuting China on an international stage, and warming its relationship with the US by pressing US lawmakers to increase weapon sales and diplomatic support to the island. Tensions were brought to a flashpoint when US Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi visited the island on an official trip and met with Ing-Wen, being the highest-ranking public official to visit Taiwan from the US since the 1990s (Richards et al., 2022). As a result of these moves by Taiwan, China has stepped up its own pressure on the island. Following the visit relations between China and the US as well as between China and Taiwan reached a new low with China responding militarily by violating Taiwanese airspace with its military and taunting the Taiwanese government with widescale military exercises (Shattuck, 2023). Additionally, China saw the January 2024 election as essential to its national security as the ruling DPP and Ing-Wen continue to stray further from Chinese interests. As such, Chinese disinformation efforts were widespread in early 2024 and were also different than previous election years (Dutcher, 2024). Dutcher (2024) explains that in 2020, the focus of election sabotaging operations using disinformation focused on attacks on the DPP candidates themselves such as the instance when China amplified the falsified story about

Ing-Wen's college education, however, in 2024, China has changed its strategy by sharing anti-American sentiment in response to Speaker Pelosi's visit to the island and coordinating military exercises with sizeable dumps of disinformation on Taiwanese social media that fear-monger and are attempting to convince the Taiwanese public that their only option is reunification with the mainland to avoid an all-out war.

As mentioned, China has also turned to more dangerous ways to influence the most recent 2024 election such as by tying military operations with dumps of disinformation designed work hand and hand to sow confusion and chaos in Taiwan. One such instance included a Chinese satellite flying over Taiwan which was mistake by Taiwan's Ministry of Defense as a missile because of a viral Chinese video of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) launching a rocket at the same time as the flyover (Cave, 2024). Although Chinese military drills around the island are familiar with Taiwanese military officials, this instance came with a condemnation from the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the Foreign Minister claiming that such attacks of disinformation hinder the prospect of diplomacy between Taipei and Beijing (Cave, 2024).

### **Chinese Influence of Taiwanese Public Opinion**

Like during an election season in Taiwan, China has been successful at keeping up its disinformation campaigns even during non-election years, with a goal of drumming up gradual support from the island's population of a Chinese takeover of the island. Such disinformation efforts were apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic in which China attempted, as spelled out by Blanchette et al. (2021), to use the pandemic to exploit fear in Taiwan's public and spread

falsehoods such as by, for example, placing blame of the disease on the Taiwanese government itself. See **Figure 5**.



**Figure 5.** (Shen, 2022).

**Figure 5** can be translated as saying, according to Shen (2022), “the DPP is [using COVID-19] experimenting on its citizens” (p.10). Such disinformation, which was common during the COVID-19 pandemic, was designed by China to spur public mistrust in Taiwanese institutions and to convince the public that Beijing would be a better governor of the island than the DPP or Tsai Ing-Wen. Furthermore, some studies have also shown that these stories may have a profound impact on the Taiwanese public and on Taiwanese politics, (Neylan, 2021), politics where reunification with the mainland takes center stage. Due to the prevalence of disinformation during that time, Taiwanese health authorities, Shen (2022) says, were forced to



hold daily press conferences to keep themselves ahead of any potential disinformation tactics about the origins of COVID-19, the COVID-19 vaccine or treatment options, or the government's response to COVID-19, all three of which were prime targets of the Chinese disinformation operation. Furthermore, in response to Chinese disinformation during the pandemic and targeting public opinion in general, Taiwan has considered banning Chinese social media applications such as Tencent Video and iQiyi and the Taiwanese legislature has given the executive new powers to prosecute those who spread disinformation in the country, a move that prompted an angry response from Beijing who say that such moves would threaten any attempt at peace (Harold et al., 2021).

### **Regional Implications**

While Chinese disinformation efforts are most prevalent against Taiwan itself, including against its populous, elected officials and elections themselves, the Chinese propaganda machine is also targeting Taiwan by focusing its efforts on neighboring states with a goal of stoking division between Taiwan and allies of the US such as Japan. In fact, the US State Department stated that “the PRC [China] spends billions of dollars annually on foreign information manipulation efforts... ..at the same time, the PRC suppresses critical information that contradicts its desired narratives on issues such as Taiwan” (US Department of State, 2023). With control over important narratives inflicting Taiwan, China has the chance to significantly shape Taiwanese foreign policy at a time when the Taiwanese government is seeking to expand its relations and partnerships with other states in the region. Japan, as according to Harold (2021) is home to thousands of US military troops and would be pivotal to any US response to a

Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Targeting Japan to stoke a division in the US-Japanese alliance by spreading falsehoods about Taiwan and its government would be hugely beneficial to Beijing and such instances of disinformation could already be underway in Japan under a low profile (Harold, 2021). Japan has responded to past instances of Chinese disinformation diplomatically like when Chinese disinformation blamed the Japanese government for releasing untreated wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant. In this instance, relations between Beijing and Tokyo were set back with Japan summoning the Chinese Ambassador demanding an explanation and cease of the disinformation operations (Davidson, 2023). However, with disinformation regarding Taiwan, China has opted for a lower profile, targeting groups critical of US military presence in Japan such as in Okinawa, with the goal of reducing the US presence in the region. As Taiwan plays a key role in the broader East Asian geopolitical landscape, the influence of Chinese disinformation on other states in the region and on cross-strait relations itself can have wider regional implications, affecting diplomatic dynamics and contributing to increased tensions (Harold, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

In the end, it is clear that Chinese disinformation is apparent in Taiwan. Through history, both sides have used propaganda as a weapon against each other's populations in an attempt to discredit and spread falsehoods about the other however, since the dawn of Taiwanese democracy, the flow of disinformation has been one-sided with China using its immense resources and technology to wage an information war with Taiwan. By exploiting weakness in Taiwanese democracy, Beijing has found ways in which it manipulates public opinion and

interferes in Taiwan's political process with the aim of boosting KMT candidates who promise warmer relations with the Chinese Communist Party. In response, relations between China and Taiwan have reached new lows with unfavourability ratings in both states being profoundly negative against one another and with looks of diplomacy to solve cross-strait tensions being out of the picture.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Israel and the Arab World**

#### **Introduction**

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, the Palestinian militant group Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya, more known by their acronym Hamas, launched a major terrorist attack on Israel. The attack, which claimed the lives of over a thousand Israeli's (Byman et al., 2023), ignited a major war between Israeli forces and Hamas in Gaza City, where the political and militant factions of Hamas are based. As such, this chapter of the thesis explores how disinformation has impacted the relationship between Israel and its Arab neighbors firstly through a historical lens and then how disinformation perpetrated also by different regional players under the guise of the currently ongoing war in Gaza City has impacted the modern relationship's Israel shares with other Middle Eastern states and with Palestinian groups. While disinformation operations have a history of being used by both Israel and other Arab states, to discredit one another, the current war in Gaza City has unleashed a whole new wave of disinformation campaigns by Hamas and other Palestinian groups, Israel itself, and other major powers in the Middle East including Iran. There have also been instances of disinformation operations, in the midst of the ongoing war, coming from other geopolitically powerful players such as China and Russia that have made its way onto internet airwaves in the Arab world (Myers et al., 2023).

The release of information during the war in Gaza City has been quick and apparent, however this has also led to massive amounts of disinformation about both sides to be shared on social media channels, which has had obstructive effects on peace negotiations and overall, on

the direction of the war. Such disinformation has been shared through tweets and claims of wrongdoing by both sides but has also been shared through use of A.I. and deepfake technologies, a new arena of disinformation tactics which are quickly becoming a large threat due to the realistic nature of such doctored images and videos. Thereby, this chapter will specifically begin by discussing the historical context behind the relationships between Israel and its neighbors and how such relationships have been affected by disinformation. It will then examine the impact of disinformation on the modernity of such relationships framed around the ongoing war in Gaza City. This includes through analyzing how disinformation has had an impact on the diplomatic efforts between Israel, Palestine, and other regional players; the roll A.I. has played in the ongoing war and how A.I. has warped public perception of Israel and the Palestinians in Israel, Gaza and elsewhere; and the influence disinformation campaigns have had on the Israeli and global public perception of the war in Gaza.

### **Historical Context**

The relationships between Israel and its Arab neighbors share a tense and distraught history and as Israel has fought multiple wars with both other Arab states and Palestinian groups, such relationships have been shaped using propaganda and disinformation as both sides have used information to try and shape national narratives. Following the founding of Israel, as a result of the 1947 United Nations' Partition Plan, the territorial and political landscape of the region has changed a great deal as both Israel and others in the region have vied for control over 'the Holy Land' (Tessler, 2009). Today, the State of Israel encompasses much of the land which used to be a part of the British Mandate for Palestine, whereas the Palestinians mostly reside in

the territories of Gaza City and the West Bank. Surrounding Israel, other formal Arab states also exist, some of which today have better relations to Israel than others. However, the disinformation from the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza City threatens many of the relationships Israel has formed with other Arab states and with those in the Palestinian territories which have been built over decades.

Since its founding, Israel has been faced with aggression from its surrounding Arab neighboring states, as well as from organizations such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (P.L.O.) which operated inside Gaza City and the West Bank. As such, Israel, discussed by Thomas (2009), has invested a considerable amount of money and resources into its armed forces and into the Mossad, Israel's national intelligence agency. The Israeli government has also devoted a great deal of resources into informational operations through Israel's history in an effort to keep Israeli public thinking in alliance with the thinking of the governing coalition at that time. Such informational operations, which have been mostly perpetrated by right-wing governing coalitions and others in the Israeli establishment that mostly remain opposed to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, included the manipulation of Israeli news media which has allowed the Israeli government to shape public narratives in times of crisis (Rinnawi, 2007). Rinnawi (2007) specifically states that:

In Israel, just as in other democratic regimes, the role of the print news media during times of crisis undergoes a kind of transformation in which news practices come to resemble those characteristics of media found in totalitarian regimes, as outlined by McQuail (1994). In this manner the press is manipulated directly by the regime and becomes an effective tool for socialization and education. (p. 151)

Thereby, such informational operations, following a crisis have led to a stagnated peace process between Israel and the Palestinians as media reports against Palestinians during a time of crisis between Israel and any Palestinian group remain mostly negative. After the breakout of the Al Aqsa Intifada in 2000, media reports that covered the Israeli government's treatment of Palestinians residing in Israel and in Palestinian territories reflected the political establishment's use of informational operations within media to manage Israeli public opinion and as a way to keep the Palestinian minority in check (Asia, 2000; Rinnawi, 2007).

As Israel to this day remains the only functional democracy in the region, many Arab states that surround Israel today and throughout history have remained autocracies and have a long history of using their own disinformation efforts against the Jewish state. Additionally, efforts by Palestinian organizations such as the P.L.O. have been successful prior to the 1990s to prevent peaceful negotiations with the state of Israel using their own disinformation efforts, the P.L.O. in particular being aided by the Soviet Union's massive disinformation machine (Cohen et al., 2020). After the establishment of the P.L.O. in the 1960s, the organization was mainly focused on resistance to Israel through terrorism and guerrilla warfare and according to Golan (1981) received financial assistance and military training from Moscow. As such, the P.L.O. also made use of disinformation operations aimed at delegitimizing the status of Israel as a state and as a tool to help recruit Palestinians to join its organization and take up arms against Israel. Moscow also saw Israel's relationship with the US as a threat to the spread of communism and funded its own disinformation campaign, dubbed Operation Sig, aimed at sowing discord between the Palestinians and Soviet-friendly Arab states and Israel and its allies such as the US (Cohen et al., 2020). Operation Sig was designed to prevent diplomacy between Israel and the Arab world as the Soviet's saw Israel as a puppet to the Americans. The Soviet Union also used

disinformation in Operation Sig to encourage Pan-Arabism, an ideology staunchly opposed to westernization, and which saw Israel as a delegitimate state, and to keep the Arab world united against Israel, which it saw as a puppet of the American government. It wasn't until the death of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, an ally of the Kremlin and supporter of Pan-Arabism, for which Egypt, who had a new president who took more of an opposition approach to Egypt's Soviet relations, reversed course and decided to engage with the Israeli's leading Egypt to become the first Arab country to normalize relations with Israel to the dismay of Moscow and its Arab allies (Ajami, 1978). Therefore, the Arab world and Israel both have histories of using disinformation and propaganda aimed at sowing discord between each other and both of which have been mostly successful in preventing a two-state solution and better relations between Israel and some of its Arab neighbors.

### **Israel-Hamas Conflict**

Toward the latter end of the Cold War, many Arab states began to normalize relations with Israel, a process which started with Egypt in 1979. Today, many Arab states see Israel is a reliable partner in the region against the increasingly growing threat that Iran poses to stability and many Arab states have normalized relations with Israel to align themselves with American interests in the region and to cozy up to the US government, a primary supplier of military aid and formidable force in global geopolitics (Muasher, 2021). However, many Arab states still are fierce advocates for a two-state solution for Palestine and Israel and keep up pressure campaigns against Israel and the US to make an established state of Palestine a reality. Additionally, many militant Palestinian groups including Hamas, with the backing of Iran, have continued engaging



in warfare and terrorism against Israel which usually prompt aggressive responses from the Israeli Defense Forces, especially from forces when the right-wing Likud Party is the majority party in government. As such, following the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack perpetrated by Hamas on Israel, the Israeli government's ongoing response threatens relations Israel has spent decades normalizing with other Arab states (Metz, 2023). Furthermore, such relations are at extremely high risk due to disinformation campaigns being carried out by Palestinian militant group and larger regional players such as Iran as the civilian death toll in Gaza climbs. Going forward, this thesis will discuss the impact that disinformation and A.I., being released because of the ongoing war between Hamas and Israel, has had on Israeli relations with the Arab world and on the ongoing peace process between Israel and Palestine.

### **Diplomatic Challenges and Peace Efforts**

As Israel continues its operation to dismantle and eliminate Hamas in the Gaza Strip, disinformation about the ongoing war has flooded social media (Hsu et al., 2024). Such disinformation operations remain strategically important to adversaries of Israel who have used doctored news and manufactured disinformation to try and derail Israeli relations with other Arab states. Iran specifically, who is mainly responsible for funding and arming Hamas, has a major stake in preventing a regional realignment of a perceived nuclear Israel allied with the US and other major players such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates against the Persians. Additionally, other global players such as Russia, an ally of Iran, have used their own platforms in an effort to spread disinformation about the war to try and drive a stake between Israel and the US and the rest of the Arab world. One such instance of disinformation that arose

from the war, amplified by Hamas as well as Iranian and Russian-controlled media sources, involved the explosion at the Ahli Arab Hospital in late October 2023. Herb (2023) notes that US intelligence found that 100-300 people had been killed in the blast and it left severe damage to the hospital itself. In the hours following the blast, the story became a global sensation and many states tried to shape their own narrative for who was responsible for the blast through disinformation. See **Figure 6**.



**Figure 6.** (Sputnik India on Twitter, 2023).

In **Figure 6**, “Sputnik India” is the Indian affiliate of Sputnik News which according to Cherntskyi (2017) is a Russian state-owned news agency which is responsible for spreading Kremlin-approved narratives about global events. The news agency has a history of spreading pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation which help Moscow’s positioning in such world

events, in this case following the Ahli Arab Hospital explosion in Gaza City. In **Figure 6**, the news agency firstly makes use of hashtags to help the post reach a wider audience on Twitter and had garnered 10,600 views at the time it was pulled from Twitter. The post helped clarify the Russian position that the hospital explosion was the result of an Israeli airstrike using an American-made bomb. This was also the position of Hamas and Iran as the Iranian president in particular made a post to Twitter that “the ‘flames of American-Israeli bombs’ dropped on the Gaza hospital will ‘soon engulf the Zionists’” (Mehdi, 2023). Many posts like **Figure 6** were circulated on social media channels including Twitter and TikTok claiming that Israel was responsible for the bombing, and it quickly became a global phenomenon. However, an American intelligence assessment found that Hamas, and not Israel, was responsible for the bombing as Herb (2023) notes that:

‘we [the U.S. intelligence community] judge that Israel was not responsible for an explosion that killed hundreds of civilians yesterday [17 October] at the Al Ahli Hospital in the Gaza Strip,’ the assessment states. ‘Our assessment is based on available reporting, including intelligence, missile activity, and open-source video and images of the incident.’ (para. 3)

Additionally, the non-partisan Human Rights Watch came to a similar conclusion and found that the hospital explosion was the result of an accidental misfire by Palestinian forces in Gaza and concludes that it was highly unlikely to be caused by an Israeli airstrike as previously claimed in **Figure 6** (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

However, before the disinformation was debunked by American and western-aligned intelligence agencies and non-partisan organizations, the diplomatic backlash against Israel had already been fierce. US President Joe Biden had planned to hold talks with the leaders of Jordan,

Egypt, and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority where Biden had planned to discuss the prospect of a Humanitarian Pause in fighting to surge aid to civilians in Gaza and planned to discuss how all parties to the summit could work toward a peace between Israel and Hamas and eventually establish an independent Palestinian state following the cease of fighting (Al-Jazeera, 2023). But following the disinformation which was spread blaming Israel and the US for the hospital explosion, President Abbas pulled out of the summit and Jordan cancelled it all together (Al-Khalidi, 2023). Jordanian King Abdullah specifically blamed Israel, as spelled out by Al-Khalidi (2023) and called the explosion “a shame on humanity” (para. 5). The disinformation spread after the Ahli Arab hospital explosion not only torpedoed efforts to slow the brutal war between Hamas and Israel but also damaged Israel’s relations with neighboring Arab states Jordan and Egypt with Jordan sending out an official diplomatic condemnation of the attack (Jordan Times, 2023). This such story of disinformation was widely successful to Iran and Russia seeking to erect obstacles to the peace process as the negative narratives of the war are helpful in painting Israel and the US as disrupters of the global order and this story was quick to be spread which allowed it to take such a foothold on social media before it could be debunked, a strategy used frequently by spreaders of disinformation.

### **Roll of Artificial Intelligence in the Conflict**

Another arena that has been amplified after the breaking out of fighting in Gaza between Hamas and Israel was the usage of A.I. to spread false narratives and aid in many states’ disinformation operations. A.I. has rapidly become a formidable force in the war and doctored images of the war have increasingly been finding their ways onto social media platforms sowing

discord between the populations of Israel and those in the Arab states and those residing in Palestine. Klepper (2023) specifically points out that A.I. has been used by both sides to blame the other for atrocities that never occurred or to shape a narrative about a particular battle or explosion as a result of the war. Furthermore, Iran has used its disinformation machine and A.I. to spread falsehoods about Israeli government officials in an effort to weaken Israel and has spread propaganda on social media channels in Israel and even in the US to delegitimize the Israeli government (Shushan, 2024). Such images will sometimes include doctored photos of destruction in Gaza and will sometimes include images of people fleeing violence or are responsible for tapping into emotions by showing carnage and desperation. See **Figure 7**.



**Figure 7.** (Eisele, 2023)

In **Figure 7**, the image shown, according to Agence France-Presse (AFP) Fact Check, was found to be false and A.I. generated. However, the image had already been shared 82,000 times on Facebook and on numerous Twitter accounts. Additionally, the image was shared by the official Twitter account for the Chinese embassy in Paris, France aiding to fears that not only Russia, but China have also been involved in disinformation operations in the Gaza Strip aimed at weakening and discrediting Israel and the US (APR, 2023). This image and many like it have been widely circulated on social media channels and have been spread to public audiences in states around the Middle East and ultimately across the entire globe. Such A.I. generated images in particular have amplified anti-Israel sentiment in states across the Middle East, including in states that have normalized relations with the Israeli government and states, such as Saudi Arabia, that have sought a normalization of relations with the Israelis. Such a surge in disinformation around the war perpetrated by Hamas and its allies, as well as the attack on October 7<sup>th</sup> against Israel itself, have been thought to be in response to Israel opening up, diplomatically, to state's that once denied its right to even exist (Reals et al., 2023). Reals et al. (2023) specifically notes that:

‘Hamas believes that the normalization of relations between Israel and the surrounding Arab states and the integration of Israel into the region is a significant threat, because those countries that do want to normalize with Israel have grown tired of surrendering their national interests to the Palestinian cause,’ Steven Cook, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, told CBS News, adding that ‘it will be very difficult for those counties that have already normalized or are seeking to normalize, like Saudi Arabia, to move forward with Israel.’ (para. 15)

More specifically, such images will usually ignite mass protests against Israel in Saudi Arabia and other gulf states that have already normalized relations with Israel making it very hard for such states to justify their friendship with the Israeli government in the midst of Israel's military operations in Gaza City. Such protests, as alluded too by Schaer (2023) also threaten the very stability of some Arab dictatorships which has caused them to tread a careful line when dealing with Israel and the war with Gaza. As such, following the start of the war a poll found that 89 percent of respondents from sixteen Arab states were now skeptical of Arab states normalizing relations with Israel (Cooper, 2024), a number that government officials in Arab states will consider very carefully when they decide how to go forward with diplomacy with the Israeli government.

### **Israeli Manipulation of Public Perception**

The war in Gaza City between Hamas and Israel has refocused global attention on the Middle East and has dominated social media channels in states around the world. Israel in particular has an enormous stake in keeping their own population aligned in support of the government's positions regarding the war. Furthermore, it is in the interest of Israel to maintain the approval of the US and other western states as it continues its military operations in Gaza City. Israel, as mentioned, has a long history of spreading disinformation aimed at swaying its domestic audience more in favor of any military action it takes against the Palestinians and in this situation, in the Gaza Strip and has a history of using a disinformation campaign to rally global opinion more in favor of Israel, especially after it takes more controversial military actions in Gaza. (Accorsi, 2024). Global and domestic public opinion is essential to Israel's

operations in Gaza City as it aims to maintain its military campaign into the future and the campaign is making Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts harder than ever. Additionally, Israel has a history of censorship of Arabic content where Accorsi (2023) states that “a Meta internal audit found that in 2021 the company censored Arabic content at a higher rate than Hebrew content, apparently in response to Israeli government requests” (para. 6). Such disinformation operations perpetrated by Israel itself have helped the right-wing Israeli coalition strengthen its stance on opposing the establishment of a Palestinian state, something that Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu has made very clear (Associated Press, 2024) and have allowed the Israeli government to justify not engaging in diplomacy with the Palestinians on a post-war peace plan for Gaza City and for the West Bank.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, disinformation operations, especially ones being perpetrated during the ongoing war between Hamas and Israel in Gaza City, have created a rift in diplomacy between Israel and the Arab world. While through history, Israel and the Arab world have engaged in numerous wars and have avoided official relations with one another which has been aided by the spread of disinformation, the latter end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began a new era for Israel in that Arab states were beginning to normalize relations with the Israeli government and recognize their right to exist. However, the ongoing war in Gaza City has created a situation where disinformation has led to diplomatic rifts between Israel and Arab states that have already normalized relations, between Israel and potential states that have looked to engage in diplomacy with the Israeli government, and between Hamas and Israel as neither side will refuse to negotiate directly with



each other which creates a difficult situation for peace to occur. And as disinformation continues to prolong the war in Gaza and lead to diplomatic splats, more people lose their lives in the region as the war intensifies with no end in sight.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

#### **Mitigation Strategies**

As mentioned in the case studies above, it is clear that disinformation exists and that it is having an effect on diplomacy between states. In some cases, disinformation can be directly correlated to diplomatic spats between states, as was the case when the US government took direct steps to punish the Kremlin who was using a coordinated disinformation strategy to interfere in the 2016 US presidential election (Office of the Press Secretary, 2016) and when adversaries of Israel amplified disinformation claiming that Israel was behind the attack on the Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City which torpedoed a planned summit between the US, Jordan, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority which could've resulted in a plan to minimize civilian casualties in the war in Gaza City (Al-Jazeera, 2023). As such, a clear connection between disinformation being spread on the internet and diplomatic relations between states can be made and as more people gather their news from internet sources, the more of an opportunity states see to try and shape a narrative helpful to that own states ambitions.

In the midst of the digital age, states have grappled with the quick rise of social media and the internet and currently are facing a new threat with the rapid rise of AI over the past year. And with levels of disinformation becoming rampant on internet servers (Sinclair, 2023), states that are victims of disinformation by other states have struggled to contain such high levels of false information being spread to its people. However, as states are beginning to take notice of

such high amounts of disinformation on social media, many are engaging in mitigation strategies designed protect the integrity of information that is being shared on social platforms.

Concerning this thesis' first case study, which analyzed how Russian disinformation operations have hindered the US-Russian relationship, the US government has taken many steps to contain the rapid spread of Russian disinformation on American social media platforms. However, the US has a major obstacle in fighting disinformation that may come from Russia but is being spread by American citizens, through the First Amendment to the US Constitution. With some of the world's most secure protections of free speech, it is particularly difficult for the US to balance containing the spread of disinformation and protecting free speech for some 330 million people (Goldenziel et al., 2019). This has also resulted in lackluster regulations against prominent social media companies which enjoy a largely unregulated atmosphere, which has given disinformation a breeding ground. Some American social media companies have regulated disinformation themselves, such as META which has launched numerous programs aimed at fighting disinformation and AI deepfakes through factchecking and other means (Al-Jazeera, 2024). However other companies such as Twitter, which has recently come under the ownership of Elon Musk, have went in the other direction and have eliminated many programs in place to protect its users against disinformation due to concerns with impeding free speech (Hammond-Errey, 2023).

The US government on the other hand has taken a different approach to fighting disinformation operations from adversaries. With US hegemony being threatened by such disinformation operations, the American government has made fighting disinformation a core priority. The White House has taken a different strategy in that they are using US intelligence to preemptively warn US social media users of what information is real of fake and disclosing

sensitive information related to Russian and Chinese disinformation operations in an effort to make social media users aware of the information they are receiving (Myers, 2023; Bose, 2022). The US State Department has been especially proactive in highlighting Russian disinformation operations through its Global Outreach Center where American diplomats are also sending resources and urging action for US allies to combat Russian disinformation in their own states (Gordon, 2023). While, according to US officials, the American government is behind on the informational warfare game (Gordon, 2023), such strategies have been effective in preemptively calling out what information is false, and which is true. While the US has a long way to go in combatting disinformation, it is clear that disinformation is a problem affecting not only American domestic political overtures, but also the very diplomacy that the Department of State engages on an international level which has prompted calls for the US to step up its game and counter adversarial disinformation on American social media platforms.

Alluding to this thesis' second case study which examined how disinformation has affected cross-strait relations between Taiwan and China, Taipei has a similar problem that Washington does in fighting disinformation from a major adversary as such disinformation puts election integrity at risk and threatens to impede domestic affairs. Klepper et al. (2024) discusses how Taiwan has similar free speech protections to the US and has mostly resisted calls for increased policing of social media companies to protect against Chinese disinformation. The Taiwanese elections held earlier this year were prime examples of where China had been focusing its disinformation operation as Beijing found it imperative to focus its efforts on electing pro-China Taiwanese politicians that would align themselves with Beijing's goals for reunification of Taiwan with mainland China (Davidson, 2024). To fight such disinformation efforts by the Chinese government, Taipei has invested heavily in factchecking operations, some

of which are spearheaded by the national government, which aim to find and flag which information is fake and which is truthful (Klepper et al., 2024). Taiwan has also invested in other areas to combat the spread of disinformation within its borders. Simon (2023) talks of how the Taiwanese government has made use of effective government communication with Taiwanese citizens and investing in education opportunities to help the public be more informed of how to spot and report instances of disinformation that comes across social media platforms. Additionally, Taipei has also seen its methods as successful as the anti-Beijing DPP won the most recent elections, a clear message to the Chinese government that Taiwanese voters support the embrace of democracy over autocracy.

In this thesis' third case study, it's shown that the Israel-Hamas War in Gaza City has put the Israeli-Arab relationship to the test. As Metz (2023) discusses, the Israeli response to the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack perpetrated by Hamas has many Arab states reconsidering their relations with Israel as the attack has ignited mass protests in Arab states where support for the Palestinian cause is high. Furthermore, the war has created a vacuum of sorts for the flow of disinformation, allowing it to spread at very high rates as state actors take advantage of the violence to shape particular narratives. Both Israel and Arab states have their own ways to deal with disinformation coming from the other or coming from more powerful players in the region. Similar to the American strategy, the Israeli government is focused on preempting disinformation by finding disinformation quick and releasing information to counter what the disinformation claims (Helmus et al., 2023). All in all, many of the states mentioned in this thesis have engaged in anti-disinformation efforts to try and slow the rapid spread of disinformation that has been flooding the internet but such efforts in some states are underfunded and need to be invested in for real change to begin to take shape.

## **Concluding Remarks**

According to the data, most people surfing the internet and engaging in social media channels have come across disinformation. In the US alone, Solon (2017) points out that experts predict that almost 170 million Americans came into contact with some form of Russian disinformation during the 2016 US presidential election season and as more people depend on social media as their primary news source, the unvetted information being spread is having a detrimental effect. Shaping public opinion, especially in democratic states, is of the utmost importance to adversaries of such democratic states as elections determine foreign policy and dictate diplomacy. This was also seen in the US when Donald Trump pulled off an upset in defeating Hillary Clinton in 2016 which was seen as a victory to Moscow. Such disinformation paid off for Russia as when Donald Trump was in the White House, the US government took a more détente approach to relations with Russia and Trump himself took any claims of Russian disinformation operations in American elections jokingly (Baker et al., 2019). Taiwan has also seen its fair share of Chinese disinformation aimed at destabilizing Taipei's government and the war between Israel and Hamas has highlighted how disinformation can affect the very outcome of conflict. As such, disinformation is prevalent and is influencing the global order. As highlighted, such disinformation operations are successful in some places and fail in others, but it is ultimately clear that disinformation has been having an effect on international relations between states. This global order, which has governed the world since World War Two, has relied on states making dialogue with each other to avoid conflict and although relationships have been put to the test because of disinformation in the past, the existence of the internet in the twenty-first century makes sharing disinformation, to as many people as possible, very simple.

Thereby, it's important for states around the globe to take measures to protect themselves from such disinformation campaigns being perpetrated by adversaries as the expansion of the internet and rise of AI makes disinformation reach more users and look more realistic. In conclusion, understanding how disinformation has an effect on relations and why such disinformation operations exist is of the utmost importance to policymakers in the twenty-first century and underscores the urgent need for proactive measures to mitigate the adverse effects of disinformation which is necessary to safeguard state soft-power and maintain state on state trust.

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