

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic

Washington conducted secret global anti-vaccine disinformation campaign against China

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An investigative report published by Reuters on June 14 revealed that the Pentagon conducted a secret anti-vaccine disinformation campaign during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic as part of massive psychological warfare operations waged by Washington against China. Targeting the Philippines in particular, the lies and disinformation spread by the US military at the peak of the pandemic contributed to keeping the country's vaccination rate at the lowest in Asia and led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

The Reuters report is detailed and extensive. In early 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, the Pentagon deployed part of its vast network of military personnel and contractors dedicated to the production of online propaganda and disinformation to wage a crusade of fear-mongering and racist attacks on China across various social media platforms, including Twitter (X), Facebook, and Instagram. Above all, the campaign targeted Sinovac, the Chinese company manufacturing an anti-COVID vaccine that was the first vaccine available in the Philippines.

One senior military officer involved in the program bluntly told Reuters, "We weren't looking at this from a public health perspective. We were looking at how we could drag China through the mud."

Hundreds of troll accounts and online bots operated by the US military attacked the vaccine with a barrage of lies in Tagalog and other languages: the vaccine was rat poison, it was part of a Chinese plot to take over the Philippines, it contained pork gelatin and was an attack on Muslims. The campaign was coordinated around the racist hashtag: #ChinaAngVirus (China is the virus).

Most of this propaganda has now been taken down from Twitter, but its disgusting residue can still be seen on Facebook. The Pentagon trolls manufactured crude racist imagery, attacked Chinese manufactured and donated face-masks, COVID test kits and the Sinovac vaccine.

The US Defense Department acknowledged the accuracy of the Reuters investigation, but claimed that its anti-vax campaign was a response compelled by China's "disinformation campaign to falsely blame the United States for the spread of COVID-19." This was not disinformation. More than any other country, Washington was responsible for the rampant spread of COVID-19 globally, due to its dominant role in world economy and politics. The "herd immunity" policy of mass infection pioneered by the Trump administration

facilitated the spread and mutation of the virus, and the White House, under both Biden and Trump, put extraordinary economic and diplomatic pressure on other countries to follow suit.

What the Reuters report documents is the extent of the culpability of Washington in the mass death wrought by the pandemic. US imperialism not only compelled much of the world to reopen, subjecting billions to infection and killing over 25 million people, it was the military headquarters of anti-vaccine propaganda.

The military conducted the campaign out of a psychological operations center on MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida, employing both personnel and contractors. With hundreds of millions of dollars in funding, the operators impersonated Filipinos and other nationalities to attack basic public health measures and whip up fear of the only available vaccine. Their online lies were picked up by and trumpeted in the mainstream media.

Only 2.1 million Filipinos out of a population of 114 million had been vaccinated by the middle of 2021. This was among the worst vaccination rates in Asia and any country where vaccines were available. The failure to vaccinate the population contributed to the Philippines having one of the worst death rates in the region.

The people of the Philippines already had a low level of trust for vaccines. The botched 2016 roll-out of a French manufactured vaccine for dengue fever, Dengvaxia, that placed about ten percent of 800,000 vaccinated schoolchildren at risk of severe infection, led to widespread vaccine skepticism. The Pentagon played on these fears, doing irreparable damage to popular confidence in basic science and public health measures.

On March 1, 2021, as the Sinovac vaccine was just being rolled out, the official COVID death toll in the Philippines stood at 12,289. By November 15, 2021, that same figure was 45,581. When one examines excess deaths above pre-pandemic figures, a more accurate measurement of the death toll, the actual death toll during this period was 228,059. This was largely due to the Delta variant, and the vast majority of these deaths would have been prevented had there been higher uptake of the Sinovac vaccine.

In other words, the US military disinformation campaign, a form of biological warfare, was directly responsible for the deaths of over 200,000 Filipinos in 2021 alone.

The Pentagon trolls also circulated claims that face-masks produced in China were infected with COVID and that Chinese manufactured

COVID test kits were defective.

The US military disinformation campaign was not limited to the Philippines. It was a global war of disinformation. In Central Asia and the Middle East, they manufactured propaganda claiming that Sinovac contained pork gelatin and was thus haram, or forbidden by Islamic law. Crude images, circulated on social media in Central Asia, showed a Chinese businessman purveying syringes full of pig blood to the Muslim population, using the Chinese flag to hide the pigs. Sinovac denied that their vaccine contained any “porcine materials” and Muslim clerics issued statements that even if it did, it would not make the vaccine haram as the vaccine was needful to save human life.

What the Reuters investigation exposes is more than just this one campaign of US military disinformation. Murderous in its own right, the anti-vaccine crusade of the Pentagon is part of a vast online apparatus of lies and propaganda run by the US government.

This was not a rogue unit, operating beyond its instructions. The Reuters report documents that the Trump White House launched the campaign and the Biden White House allowed its continued operation until the middle of 2021. There were National Security Council meetings held to discuss it. Leading US State Department officials stationed at embassies in targeted countries were aware of the campaign and raised objections to it, but they were overridden by the military. The anti-vax campaign of the Pentagon was part of an extensive and ongoing operation of online disinformation whose existence is widely known in official circles.

According to Reuters, the Pentagon began using social media tools in 2010 to create a “sprawling ecosystem” of online propaganda and disinformation. One of the limitations of this campaign, however, is the fact that “in peacetime, the Pentagon needed approval of embassy officials before conducting psychological operations in a country.”

In 2019, prior to either the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine, then Secretary of Defense Mark Esper “signed a secret order that later paved the way for the launch of the US military propaganda campaign. The order elevated the Pentagon’s competition with China and Russia to the priority of active combat.” By secretly declaring that the United States was effectively in a state of war with Russia and China, the military gave itself the de facto power to conduct limitless campaigns of disinformation, so-called “influence operations,” around the globe.

This is funded with billions of dollars. A study published by the Stanford Internet Observatory in 2022 documented some of the US’ “covert influence operations” in the Middle East and Central Asia. The report documented the production of “fake news, fake faces, fake followers,” and “sham media outlets.” Among the many campaigns it reported was the use of a fake persona and a sham media outlet in Central Asia to manufacture accusations against China of committing genocide against the Uyghurs, including “alleged organ trafficking, forced labor, sexual crimes against Muslim women and suspicious disappearances of ethnic Muslims in Xinjiang.”

The US disinformation trolls operate with the full knowledge of social media executives. Reuters reports that Facebook executives were alarmed at the anti-vax propaganda of this particular disinformation campaign and threatened to shut down the fake accounts. At the direct request of the military, Facebook allowed the accounts to continue and did not take down the anti-vax content. In early 2021, Facebook officials arranged a meeting with the Biden National Security Council to discuss their anger over this particular campaign and the Biden administration agreed to shut it down. The anti-vax campaign was officially ended in the middle of 2021,

according to Reuters.

The Reuters report reveals the intimate coordination that exists between the giant social media corporations and the US government apparatus of disinformation. Facebook is not only aware of the US operations on its network, it coordinates them with the military and even called a meeting of the National Security Council to discuss it.

Washington’s mass manufacture of lies in service of global war—“active combat” with Russia and China—is expanding. Reuters reported, “In an unclassified strategy document last year, top Pentagon generals wrote that the U.S. military could undermine adversaries such as China and Russia using ‘disinformation spread across social media, false narratives disguised as news, and similar subversive activities [to] weaken societal trust by undermining the foundations of government.’”

The very actors responsible for the anti-vax campaign, with the blood of hundreds of thousands on their hands, are a key part of these operations. Reuters noted that in February, “the contractor that worked on the anti-vax campaign—General Dynamics IT—won a \$493 million contract. Its mission: to continue providing clandestine influence services for the military.”

Washington’s hypocrisy knows no bounds. Baseless accusations of Russian trolls meddling in American elections or of Chinese bots undermining democracy have been the mantra of US imperialism’s war-mongering for nearly a decade. Social media executives have been called on the carpet by Senate investigative committees for allowing this alleged activity. Tiktok is threatened with a US ban for being a vehicle of Chinese disinformation.

And yet it is Washington that has launched a blitzkrieg of online lies and propaganda. It is Pentagon trolls who not only peddle disinformation about China, but manufacture mass anti-vaccine sentiment in the midst of a global pandemic. The very social media executives performatively upbraided for allowing Russian trolls to operate are secretly meeting with the National Security Council to discuss the conduct of the US disinformation machine.

US imperialism operates as if it is already at war with Russia and China. Its machinery of online propaganda and disinformation exists to whip up a public frenzy in support of this war. The anti-vax campaign was one of its many noxious products. It reveals much, but above all this: there is no human cost too high for Washington’s war aims, not even the deaths of hundreds of thousands from US manufactured lies.



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