Center for Strategic and International Studies

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FEATURING:
Congressman Joaquin Castro,
Vice Chair, House Foreign Affairs Committee and Member,
House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence

CSIS EXPERT:
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Transcript By
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Hi. I am thrilled to have Representative Joaquin Castro here with me, from the 20th Congressional District of Texas. My name is Seth Jones. I’m the Harold Brown Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Representative Castro is the vice chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. He’s on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. He’s also on the House Committee on Education and Labor. And we’ll talk about education issues and the Chinese a little bit later in our discussion. And also, chairman of the Congressional Japan Caucus, so has a deep background in Asia, including on ASEAN.

So welcome, again. Thanks for coming virtually to CSIS. And let me just ask you first, there’s been a lot of concern publicly – first coming from U.S. intelligence officials like [William] Evanina from the Director of National Intelligence Office. And then we’ve heard social media organizations like Microsoft express concern about Chinese meddling in the U.S. election. What is your concern about what the Chinese are doing right now, and to what degree or how serious of a threat do you see the Chinese right now in what will be a very important U.S. presidential, as well as Senate and House, elections?

Yeah. Well, first of all, thank you for having me. It’s great to be back, even if only virtually right now, at CSIS, and to discuss China and the topic of misinformation. I think that as a nation we need to take any kind of election interference very seriously. And in many ways, we learned our lesson in 2016, when Russia severely interfered with our electoral process. And so, the reports and the allegations that China is also trying to interfere with our election is obviously something that is very serious for our democracy.

Now, before I talk specifically about China, I want to lay out the context here, because I mentioned 2016. There – you know, the intelligence agencies have told us that for years different countries have tried to monitor what our politicians are doing, what campaigns are doing, what’s going on with U.S. elections, and so forth. That’s been true, for example, of Russia and China. What Russia did differently in 2016 was a few things. First, they widely created a lot of fake accounts, fake personas and personalities to spread misinformation in the United States, and even to mobilize American citizens to conduct different actions.

So, for example, in my home state of Texas, they got people to show up for pro-Confederate and anti-Confederate rallies in the city of Houston, Texas. So that was one element. The other element also was that whereas previously nations had essentially spied on or attempted to spy on campaigns and so forth, what was partly different this time was that Russia took that information and in concert, working with others, essentially dumped that information and weaponized it for political purposes.

So, when you ask the question how concerned should we be about what China’s doing, we ought to be very concerned. The question is, what methods are they using, and what are they going to do with that information? Again, all of it is bad, but I think when you see what Russia did in weaponizing that information, that’s especially damaging and especially a high degree of interference with a nation. And right now, as far as – at least as far as we’ve seen, Russia and China have been operating on two different levels, where the Russian interference is much more focused, much more directed, and in terms of political impact much worse. Again, not to dismiss what China’s doing, because we have to be vigilant about it, but we
need the intelligence agencies to continue to figure out what China’s purpose is there.

Seth Jones: Yeah. China has long collected on companies. I was – my information, as well as millions of Americans’, was taken among the SF-86 forms in the OPM data breach, and Equifax.


Seth Jones: One thing that is interesting on the weaponization is the New York Times, among other publications, have reported that the Chinese did pursue direct disinformation in the early stages of Covid by forwarding texts to millions of Americans in the United States about the potential for a U.S. government lockdown, quarantine with U.S. federal forces on the streets. In my conversations to U.S. intelligence officials, several of them said to me that was relatively new. It wasn’t just stealing information. It was trying to create some fear in the United States and exploiting our vulnerabilities on access to social media in ways that were more like the way the Russians had operated. So, I don’t know if you’ve seen some evidence that the Chinese are getting a little bolder in how they’re operating.

Rep. Joaquin Castro: Well, I think that’s absolutely true of different foreign actors, and even nonstate actors. I think, as you mentioned and as I had said before, traditionally what state actors were doing was collecting information about Americans, whether through data theft, or espionage, and so forth, and then taking it to evaluate that intelligence to figure out what their posture might be towards a particular candidate, towards the nation, you know, a trade issue – whatever it might be. What you saw in 2016 was that Russia essentially changed their model. They suddenly not only collected the information, but they were dumping it for political damage.

And so, it’s not surprising then that with the advent of social media, which allows another – a lot more entry points, actually – for a nation to be able to get the attention of a group of people, in this case the American public. It’s not surprising with these new platforms that nations would start to – start to exploit those. You know, one of those platforms, aside from social media as you mentioned, is texting. It gives the ability to widely get our message through text messages to a bunch of Americans.

And so, we do have to be very vigilant because I think that nations took the message from 2016 that you can do real damage and inflect real pain in the United States through your methods of not just collection but of how you weaponize that information. And so, it doesn’t surprise me. And we have seen – we have seen nations start to figure out how they can innovate and do more damage.

Seth Jones: Yeah. Let me take us back a little bit to more of a sort of strategic level. And there has certainly been concern, and you’ve actually written about this, both in Washington and Beijing that the two countries are engaging in long-term strategic competition. I think you wrote in a piece two years ago, there needs to be some competition. Compete not cheat, I think was the title of that – of that piece.

Seth Jones: There has been along those lines a lot of focus on military competition, including building of major conventional, even nuclear platforms and systems, certainly on the economic side, which you highlighted in that piece. A lot of people don't often emphasize the information and ideological space. My question here is: How important do you think information is in U.S. competition with the Chinese? And actually, from the other perspective as well, how important is information from the Chinese perspective in competing with the United States?

Rep. Joaquin Castro: Well, I think that information no question, with the digital age that we’re in, the fact that people can draw their information and their news from so many sources is incredibly important. And we have seen the danger, including in our past election, of completely unmediated information, where the sources can’t necessarily be trusted and the impact that that can have. But let’s establish two separate baselines here. In the United States you have what is, relatively speaking, a very open society with information flowing from all sides. And somewhat mediated, but not nearly as mediated, or restricted, or regulated as you have in China.

So, I would argue that in that competition of ideas, in that competition of thought, that our best weapon is the truth. That our best weapon is the fact that we are open to different ideas, that we don’t shy away from opinion and perspective of different kinds. The same can’t be said for what you see in China. I remember being there in 2010 for the World Expo, for example, and not being able to get on Facebook even, right? And so, there’s still a lot of media sources that are not available to the Chinese people, a lot of information that is kept from them. And to me, that signifies a kind of weakness for China, that in many ways they’re still scared of the truth. They’re scared of information.

That said, they’re obviously a very powerful economy. Second largest economy in the world. Our largest trading partner. They have ambitious plans for their future. And their Belt and Road Initiative is very ambitious. And that’s why I said in my piece, part of what we’ve suffered from in the United States is that we don’t have, to date, a comprehensive or holistic approach to China. And we have not distinguished, to me, what is an important difference, what it means for China to compete fairly versus what it means for them to cheat. And until we can get at that distinction and understand it, and agree more or less among ourselves even as Americans which is which – you know, which is one and which is the other – then what you’re going to see is this halting kind of one-off, you know, policies towards China, which I think is what we’ve seen a lot of in recent years.

Seth Jones: Yeah, we certainly have. And on your point more broadly about vulnerabilities in the Chinese system, you know, there are certainly vulnerabilities, and there have been historically, when regimes attempt to control access of information to their populations. They often – those populations often want more truthful information. So, we’ll get – actually, a little bit later we’ll get into your thoughts on ways to support individuals, including in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan, that are on the receiving end of Chinese information and disinformation operations.

But before we go there, I wondered if we could get your thoughts on Covid-19. You know, one of the interesting components – this is a disinformation and partly misinformation component – which is Beijing both immediately denied that Covid-19 originated in Wuhan, and then actually they went even further, including
government officials – senior officials from the ministry of foreign affairs – openly accusing the U.S., including the U.S. Army, of introducing the virus into China last year.

How do you deal with those kinds of accusations? How serious do you take them? And these were Chinese officials arguing that the virus did not originate in China, but actually originated from a U.S. introduction. Do you think these kinds of examples mark a new type of Chinese aggressiveness in the information sphere? I mean, how do you gauge that?

Rep. Joaquin Castro: That’s a great question. And, you know, part of me says, in my own mind, that that’s tough to answer because the world had not seen a pandemic of this nature for 100 years, right, since the so-called Spanish Flu. And I think that the Chinese government and the U.S. government were grappling to deal with it. That said, I think it’s fair to be very critical about how – about the information or misinformation that China put out.

And again, we should lead with the truth. And we should demand the truth of China, and its leaders. But what we can’t do, and I think what President Trump had a tendency to fall into, was exaggeration or unfounded claims, because then what we do is we lose credibility, not only, I think, among the people of the world and among some of our own citizens, but certainly with China and, you know, with our allies.

And I think the same for them. You know, when they go out and they deny the obvious, when they go out and they deny things that people can see with their own eyes, I think it’s the same thing. I think they lose credibility with the world. And so, we should absolutely demand the truth of them.

Seth Jones: Yeah. I think that’s certainly true. And demand the truth of ourselves too, in what we say.

So, I wanted to turn to an issue that is, I think, near and dear to your family and your background, which is education. Your father is a retired teacher. Education system in the U.S. is very important. It makes us competitive. It’s also been a source of some debate within the United States. There has been a small proportion – and I want to emphasize small proportion – of students, including visitors, from outside of the country, including from China.

There are examples of espionage at U.S. universities. There’s been a lot of debate about the freedom of speech and the freedom to debate the issues as part of the Confucius Institutes at U.S. universities. We now have a professor at Harvard University who’s been arrested and is being charged with violating U.S. law as part of the Thousand Talents Program from China.

So, from your perspective, how do you navigate between keeping the United states a top, elite country for education – including at its graduate and its undergraduate levels – but also ensure that we’re protecting our own national security? Or how do you balance that?

Rep. Joaquin Castro: I think that’s an important consideration, right? Look, this country has benefitted from the fact that throughout the generations the world’s best and brightest have
wanted to come to the United States, not only to study but to do things like start a business here. And because of that – in part because of that, at least – the United States became the strongest, most powerful economy in the world. So, when you start considering locking people out or shutting people off, you have to think about that history and the context.

Now, there’s no question that, as you mentioned, there have been high-profile cases of people stealing information from American universities, American research universities. And that we have to be able to vet people better and put a stop to things like that. But what I do disagree with is just wholesale saying: We’re not going to take any more Chinese students. We’re going to X out the whole country and, you know, you just kind of put a blanket prohibition on a whole group of people. That has existed before, by the way. That was called the Chinese Exclusion Act, which existed for decades in the United States. So, I don’t think that that’s the answer either.

Again, redouble our efforts to vet people, redouble our efforts to be vigilant, to make sure that no one either from China or any other foreign country is stealing data, or intelligence, or secrets, so to speak. I think that’s fair. But to say in a blanket way, we’re just not going to take you all anymore, I don’t think is a best policy. And again, you know, like I said, when they cheat, we have to be there to call them on it. And on those instances, obviously, that fits into the case of cheating.

Seth Jones: Yeah. There’s another issue that’s cropped up this summer, including during Covid, when some American universities have gone virtual and have had students participating in classes from overseas, including Hong Kong, and China more broadly. And there have been a number of reports, newspaper articles from major U.S. newspapers. Princeton, for example, students in a Chinese politics class are using now codes instead of names to protect their identities, so that they can speak freely in class, in some cases, over mediums like Zoom, that can be monitored by Chinese agencies.

Do you – do you see potential challenges here with free speech in U.S. classrooms now being impacted at all? Or is this a – is this kind of an overstated threat? What’s your sense about this?

Rep. Joaquin Castro: Well, let me start with what we wish for. We wish for, again, a society where opinions, and perspectives, and analyses are freely offered, and people don’t have to be fearful of what they’re going to say – particularly in an academic setting. You know, obviously as long as they’re not hurting anybody, they’re not engaging in hate speech and so forth, with certain guidelines. But that’s what we wish for. So, then the question is, how do you achieve that? And I do think that it’s fair to, in a diplomatic way – because I’ve said that we have to lead with diplomacy – in a diplomatic way to pressure China to make sure that they allow people to express themselves as freely as possible.

And I do think that the United States and its allies around the world – including many of the countries that China is getting closer to in Europe, in Latin America, in Africa – we need to work together to let China know that this is an important issue to us, that this kind of freedom of expression, freedom of speech and opinion, is an important issue to us. And we should – we should pressure them in that way.
Seth Jones: Yeah. It certainly is important. I wonder if I can go back in history a little bit and raise this issue of the Cold War. The U.S., with the Soviets, engaged in a several decades-long Cold War. I think, as you noted with the Chinese, this is not just about competition, it’s about cooperation. The U.S. did engage in some cooperation with the Soviets, including on arms control issues.

But there was an important element, I think particularly as we got deeper into the Cold War, including in the latter part of the Cold War, where information became an important aspect of that competition. So, leaving aside for a moment the differences – of which there are many – between the Soviet Union and China, there may be lessons – and this is what I wanted to ask you about – lessons in what we can learn from that rivalry. For example, the U.S. did make a number of significant investments in the information arena.

The U.S. expanded its involvement in radio programs, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which beamed into the Soviet Union and into Eastern Europe. This goes back to your comment at the beginning of our conversation about populations that face state-run media and repressive media outlets. The U.S. also had established a U.S. Information Agency. So, is there anything we can take from those components of the Cold War that might be worth thinking about as we move in – as we move forward in competition with the Chinese, especially the role of information?

Rep. Joaquin Castro: Well, I think there absolutely is. I think that we need to strengthen our ability to project our message out into the world. Again, this is a nation that over the generations has been the North Star on things like freedom, human rights, democracy, rooting out corruption. And as long as we make our message consistent with those principles and those values, then I believe more and more people around the world will buy into them, will agree with them. And that’s what we see.

I believe that people – there are people in China that are yearning for more freedom and are also – they want human rights to be respected. They want to be able to fully make their own political choices. They want to root out corruption. And, by the way, that’s the case not only in China but I think throughout the world, that people yearn for these things. And we’re also in an age where people yearn for information. And that’s always been true.

However, the difference now is that there are so many more platforms by which information can get to people. So, when governments, including the Chinese government, shut off as many avenues as they can in order to control the information, over time I don’t see that as a sustainable method of governance. And the United States, as I mentioned, I think our job number one is to get our message out about the principles and the values that we stand for. We do need to strengthen our apparatus for that because it has atrophied of the years. And that makes it harder for the United States to reach the people of the world. We need to do a better job of it.

Seth Jones: So, as you look across the U.S. government today, we certainly have substantial funding for the Department of Defense. And what goes along with that are all of the – all the money that goes into platforms and systems, from aircraft carriers to submarines, that might engage at some point in conflict. But you also have a
background in at least two of the committees you sit on that gets into areas of U.S.
national security. And I'm wondering if you have thoughts here on the – how well-
funded and how well-prepared we are in our other government agencies.

State, for example, has had its – it's budgets are relatively low, certainly compared
to the Department of Defense. We don't even have a U.S. Information Agency
anymore. Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty budgets and Voice of America are
pretty small right now, and our radio budgets for Asia. What's your sense about
how well prepared we are to get our messages out on multiple forums, really
outside of the military dimension?

Rep. Joaquin Castro: I mean, that’s a great question. Look, we have the strongest military in the world.
We spend, by far, more money than any nation in the world on our military. But I’ll
tell you this: I don’t believe we can buy enough tanks, jet fighters, or any other
kind of military equipment that is going to convince the people of the world that
the United States is and should be the North Star for this world. The only way
we’re going to do that is by living our principles and values, number one, in this
country, and then also by telling the people of the world what we’re about.

And so, to your questions, yes, I think we need to strengthen the infrastructure of
diplomacy. Over the last few years, what we’ve seen is that that infrastructure of
diplomacy has been weakened. I won’t say it’s completely hollowed out because I
think that’s unfair. But it has been weakened. And I say that realizing that vis-à-vis
our military we were already leaning on our defense infrastructure more than our
diplomatic infrastructure before. And over the last few years, we’ve weakened our
diplomatic infrastructure. So, in the next few years what I see as an imperative for
us to strengthen that infrastructure of diplomacy. And of course, that – again, that
includes our messaging and our information that we put out about what this
country stands for, what it’s about, you know, the fact that we believe the human
rights of people around the world should be respected, that people's rights deserve
to be respected. All of those things I think we’ve got to do a better job about.

And also, when you look at the military and its spending, we are, besides – I know
we’re discussing information and misinformation, but when you think about
intelligence, China, Russia, and a few other nations are quickly working to develop
in the areas of artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and a few other areas.
And if they’re successful in those missions and if they’re successful well before the
United States, the risk that we run is that some of even our most sophisticated
weaponry – the things that we paid billions of dollars for – could be rendered
useless in a manner of a few keystrokes – literally, a few keystrokes – if they’re able
to perfect the technology that they’re pursuing. And so to me, not only – you know,
I said we’ve got to strength that infrastructure diplomacy and it’s true, but even if
you just looked at the defense part there are things that we have to adjust in terms
of how we’re spending in defense and in preparation, in cybersecurity.

I don’t think that we do nearly enough in cyber. You know, our alliances are not as
strong as they could be, although I will give credit that we have tried to strengthen
them in the few years since 2016. But still, they are not where they could be, and
we’ve got to put a lot of work into cybersecurity and cyber alliances as well. If not,
I’m telling you, with the technology that could be coming, a lot of these weapons
that we’ve paid high dollar for could be rendered useless.
Seth Jones: Yeah. One of the things you brought up is artificial intelligence/machine learning in the – in your answer to the question. And that does raise – one of the final questions I have is the U.S. intelligence community under the Director of National Intelligence in 2019 shut down all access to the Open Source Enterprise so that Americans or researchers can’t get access to translated Chinese information. One of the reasons that we’ve expressed some concern about that, and I have as well, is because during the Cold War, for example, one of the best ways to understand what was going on within the Soviet Union was our Foreign Broadcast Information Service that translated really millions of words of Russian, including from Russia’s allies in Eastern Europe, and made them publicly available.

So, part of the question is, what role really should open source play? It’s certainly not just a government entity because we do have with machine learning and artificial intelligence ways to translate documents, but what has struck me in watching some of the issues like COVID-19 within China is how much there’s a robust debate going on in Chinese platforms that most Americans will never see because it is in Chinese and most people do not, A, speak Mandarin; and B, that information is not translated. So, the largest newspaper – circulating newspaper in China is a translation into Mandarin of English and other foreign news sources. And part of the question is, how serious should we be taking open-source information as we move into the future?

Rep. Joaquin Castro: Well, I think you’re right to be concerned and I think that it’s essential. And generally speaking, I think that the more eyes you have on these things the better, that you shouldn’t just contain it to a smaller group of people. And the reason is that you have a lot of people in the United States in many fields – in academia, in research, and others – that I believe whose perspectives can be helpful as we examine these things.

And look, we don’t want a Cold War with China. We don’t want a repeat of the decades-long relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States. But we do want to understand China, and we want to understand what they’re saying and doing, and that effort goes beyond just a limited group of people in the intelligence community, for example. I think they should lean on their fellow Americans, you know, like I said, in other capacities or working in other capacities who can also be helping – help us understand these dynamics. And so, I am hoping for more openness in the coming years.

Seth Jones: Last question, and probably the most difficult – it’s certainly the most sensitive – is how do we in the U.S. think about combating disinformation or supporting freedom and democracy overseas, particularly in places like Taiwan and Hong Kong, both of which are on the frontlines of China’s information-warfare efforts? So, from your perspective, are there things we want to avoid doing? And are there things that we want to do a little – to take a little more seriously, steps we should – we should be thinking about that we haven’t taken?

Rep. Joaquin Castro: I mean, you’re right, that is a tough question because when you take the – we’ll take the example of Hong Kong. Look, we want –

Seth Jones: Which you’ve been active in tweeting about recently, I see.

Rep. Joaquin Castro: Yeah, yeah. We’ve been – we’ve proposed legislation on it with Rep. Curtis in the
Foreign Affairs Committee and Marco Rubio had it on the Senate side. We want to be supportive of the folks in Hong Kong as they try to preserve their rights, preserve a democratic Hong Kong. And also, you know, spoke – we spoke out against the national security law that China put into place. I think that was very important.

So, you asked the question, you know, what is our best approach. And the reason I say it’s tough is because, look, what’s – the effort that’s going on in Hong Kong among Hong Kongers has to be seen as a – as a native effort. It can’t be seen as an effort that is primarily driven by the United States or anyone else, just as things that are going on in the United States need to be seen as things that are being driven by Americans, right? And so – and so we want to be supportive, but it’s their initiative and it’s their effort.

Now, I think what we can do is that we can speak out to China and also speak out to the world about what we believe and our perspective on these issues. And of course, within the United States we can try to take legislative action, as I proposed and other Democrats and other Republicans have proposed. But it’s important to remember first and foremost that the people in Hong Kong are doing these things because that’s what they believe, because that’s the future they want, right, because their disagreements with China are their own. And you know – and that I think is the tough part, is how do we make sure that the world and that even China knows and realizes that those efforts are native efforts there, and that we support them as Americans.

And I’ll tell you, I mean, it was – it was incredible to see – to see during these months of protest the American flags, for example, the statements that have come out of Hong Kong, and the inspiration that Hong Kong has drawn from the United States and from other democracies. And it’s going to be important that we continue to speak up and stand up for them.

Seth Jones: Well, thank you very much. I think this last issue highlights how important the information component is and how important it is for you and others on the Hill to be taking it seriously, which you have been.

So, I just want to thank you very much, Congressman, for taking a few minutes with us here discussing issues related to China, information, disinformation. And thank you very much for all you’re doing in support of the American people.

Rep. Joaquin Castro: Well, thank you. Thank you very much for having me.

Seth Jones: Thanks.