
China's Digital War on Terrorism: Can Mass Surveillance and Cyber Censorship Radicalize a Nation

Casey E. Babb, Ph.D

Alex Wilner, Ph.D,

Norman Paterson School of International Affairs

Carleton University

Corresponding Author

Casey Babb, caseybabb3@cmail.carleton.ca

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Overview

This research brief concisely describes my analysis of China’s internet censorship system – colloquially known as “the Great Firewall” – and the societal impacts it has had in terms of nationalism, radicalization, and terrorism, particularly amongst China’s youth. In short, for over twenty years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been limiting online freedoms and restricting any and all content in cyberspace that could destabilize the Party and the reign of President Xi Jinping. However, China’s online censorship and surveillance apparatus was not always as oppressive and restrictive as it is today. Indeed, as Wang (2020) notes, the internet in China was once a vibrant channel for new thinking, where internet users or “netizens,” had relatively free and open discussions, and where users, typically younger ones, expressed an appetite for debating big ideas – including how the country should be governed. Yet, over the last decade, particularly under Xi, this dynamic has changed dramatically, with the CCP suggesting that for a range of reasons – including religious extremism and domestic and international terrorism – greater oversight and control in cyberspace is needed (Buckley, 2015; Sacks, 2018; Byman, 2019). For these same reasons, the CCP has also increasingly relied on advanced technologies to monitor and oppress certain minority populations (e.g., Uyghurs) in the physical domain, where, for instance, the regime has effectively turned Xinjiang into a surveillance state.

Interestingly, subject matter experts have noted that during this period of increased repression, there has been an uptick in numerous destabilizing trends, including rising online nationalism – particularly among China’s younger generation of internet users – increasing Islamic extremism at home, and intensifying Islamic extremist sympathies abroad. Yet, despite these trends, few scholarly works have attempted to explore these phenomena. Using a mixed-methods approach, comprised of interviews with international subject matter experts, analysis of open-source reporting and publicly available data, my research sought to explore and shed light on these reported observations, with the overall objective of informing more nuanced policy decisions towards China. To note, this project was part of a broader research effort I undertook in support of my doctoral dissertation – a large part of which was focused on China’s cyber strategy and the CCP’s control of the digital domain, both at home and abroad.

Summary of Findings

I found that there has been a correlation between online CCP censorship in China and increased nationalism, especially throughout the country’s younger generation – namely China’s Gen-Z population – persons loosely defined as being born after 1996. However, as Wong (2022) recently suggested, “Chinese nationalism is a multi-faceted, fragmented, and politically contested discourse, whose level of heterogeneity varies in accordance with both top-down and bottom-up forces. The nation may be cursorily homogenous, but the nationalistic sentiments framed around it are most certainly not.” This variance is observable across a wide spectrum of Chinese nationals who live very different lives across a range of social, economic, and political realities that divide and define communities throughout the mainland. In other words, nationalistic sentiment across older, poorer, and more rural communities appears to be largely

unaffected or influenced by online CCP censorship and control, while younger, more affluent, tech-savvy Chinese youth who are more digitally engaged appear to derive much of their patriotism to broader party narratives disseminated online. Yet, there remains little evidence of any singular or consistent type of nationalism. Rather, I have observed nationalism rooted in everything from China's ascent as a global power player and economic superpower, to the country's technological innovations, to individual of family wealth, to pervasive political rhetoric – much of which is connected to Xi Jinping and his greatness.

Further, despite China's claims the country has been grappling with rising Islamic extremism, we have found little evidence to suggest the country has seen a surge in terrorism or violent extremism since the party began controlling online content and communication. To echo Kine (2021), China has, in my view, essentially "...reframe[d] state repression of Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang" as part of a the country's War on Terror – something the CCP has been seized with for decades. If anything, there has been a surge over the last decade of anti-Muslim rhetoric and abuse, both online and in-person, directed towards China's Muslims, particularly those who identify as Hui and Uyghur. Indeed, as Xi Jinping has increasingly and aggressively worked to Sinicize religion in China, the CCP has carried out a widespread campaign of repression against China's eleven million Uyghurs. Yet, despite these atrocities, I also found little evidence that Muslim extremist groups outside China have been motivated by these abuses, aside from the Islamic State-Khorasan who, in 2022, spoke out against Chinese imperialism and the regime's oppression of the country's Muslim population. While examining Islamic extremist sympathies outside mainland China was not my primary objective, it was a peripheral phenomenon I felt warranted at least some examination.

All told, more scholarly work is required to assess the degree China's control of online information is contributing to nationalism, extremism, and terrorism. While we do know that nationalism – broadly speaking – has increased in tandem with CCP control of the Internet, it would be overly simplistic to imply there has been a cohesiveness to it, or that there has been a single identifiable factor influencing that increase. Going forward, further research and analysis will be needed to determine the extent to which China's Great Firewall is contributing to nationalism and extremist views, and the degree to which Xi Jinping's increasingly personalist leadership style has permeated into the nation's psyche, and what that might mean in terms of nationalism, extremism, and terrorism for the country in the future.

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