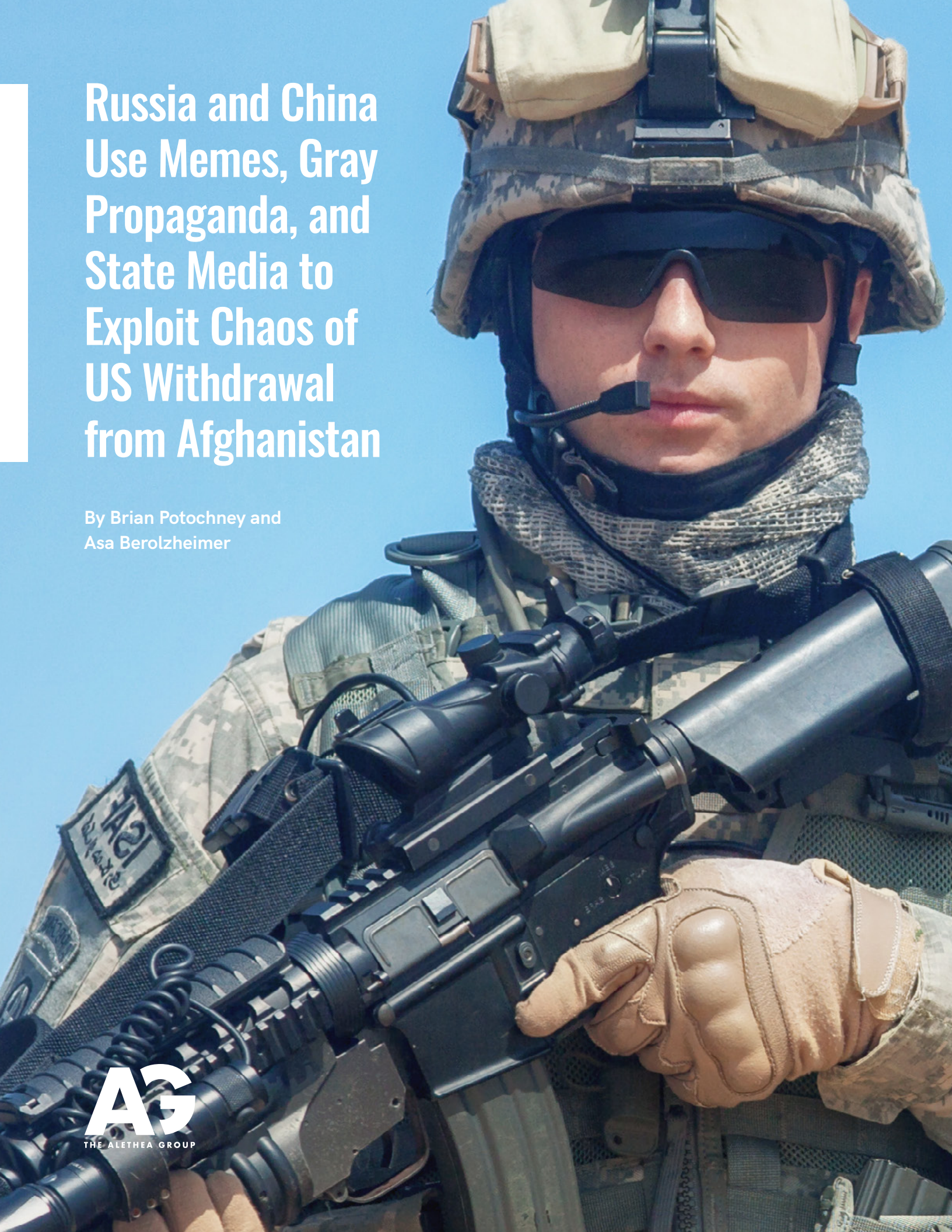


# Russia and China Use Memes, Gray Propaganda, and State Media to Exploit Chaos of US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

By Brian Potochney and  
Asa Berolzheimer





## OVERVIEW

# On Wednesday, the official RT Twitter account posted a tweet that appeared to show an Afghan refugee family with various military-grade weapons photoshopped into their backpacks, in a clear appeal to anti-refugee sentiment.

The tweet, which was later deleted, reflects the Russian and Chinese state media strategy to weaponize the chaos of the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's subsequent arrival in Kabul.

These state-aligned media outlets have leveraged widespread public shock at the events to advance broad criticisms of Western democracy. The varying employment of internet humor, social wedge issues, and conspiracy theories are tools for authoritarian actors to exploit legitimate outrage and criticism. These narratives reach beyond the events in Afghanistan, as they seek to undermine faith in liberal democracy altogether.

In order to understand Russian and Chinese narratives targeting international audiences, Alethea Group analyzed English-language articles, tweets, and memes published in Russian and Chinese state-owned media outlets between August 14th and August 25th. While many of the criticisms of the American withdrawal are grounded in factual coverage of the chaos on the ground, we saw state-sponsored official accounts couch these facts in familiar and misleading narratives against Western democracy. We have highlighted examples of key narratives below.



[https://twitter.com/rt\\_com/status/1430517063135735809](https://twitter.com/rt_com/status/1430517063135735809)

# Russian State-Aligned Media

While most Russian state news outlets focused on breaking news in Kabul and statements from public officials, RT and Sputnik occasionally diverged from factual coverage to post memes and “humor” related to the conflict. Both outlets published articles about meme trends making light of U.S. leadership, such as RT’s coverage of the Taliban “trolling” President Joe Biden, and Sputnik’s compilation of memes in response to Biden’s video conference briefings.



[https://twitter.com/RT\\_com/status/1428054090706194439](https://twitter.com/RT_com/status/1428054090706194439)



<https://twitter.com/SputnikInt/status/1427061435386015744>

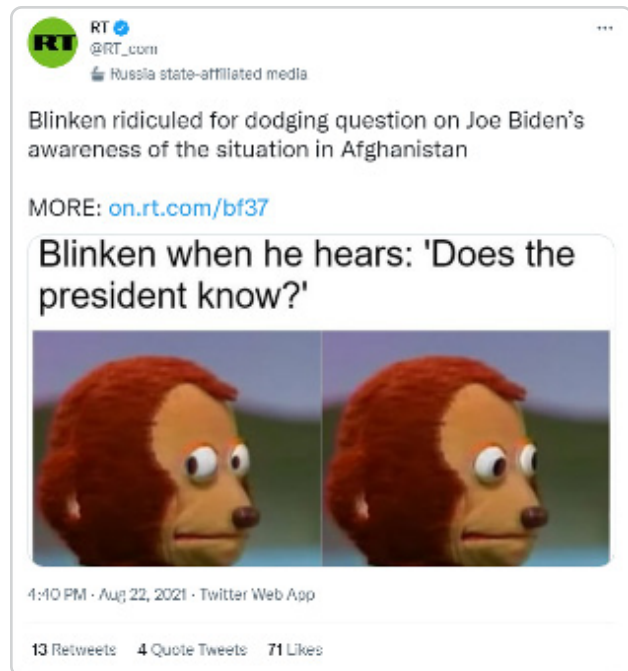
Russian state media also highlighted divisive social issues in their coverage of events in Afghanistan. For example, an @RT\_com tweet used the rainbow flag to criticize America's alleged liberal influence and stated "Western democracy can take a seat now, thanks."<sup>1</sup> Another RT article about Afghan refugees included an edited image of a wolf in sheep's clothing wearing a turban. Anxieties about an inflamed refugee crisis is a pressure point with particular relevance to East and Central Europe, where Middle Eastern asylum-seekers are currently caught in a diplomatic standoff between Belarus and other East European nations. Anti-refugee rhetoric served as a key theme in Russian influence operations during election cycles of 2015-2017, and it has reemerged as a key propaganda narrative in recent weeks.



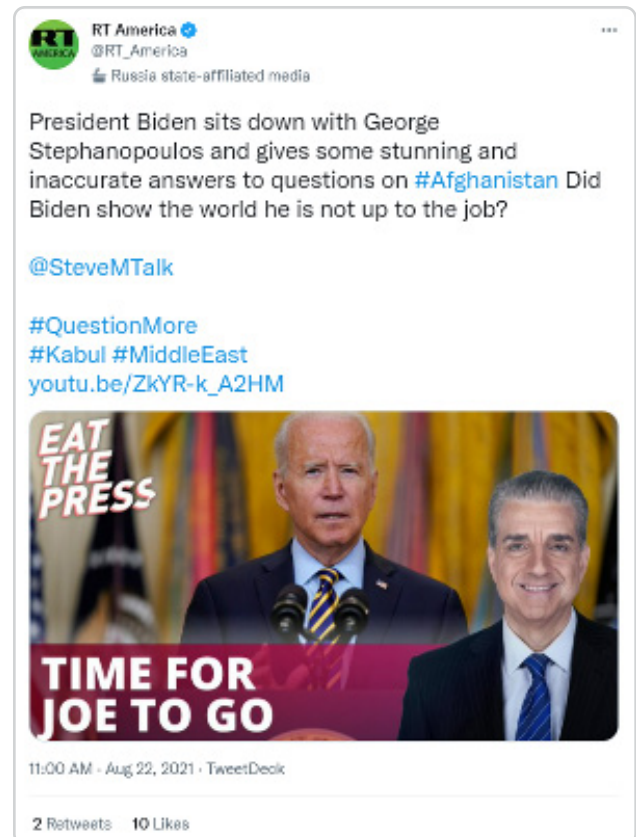
[https://twitter.com/RT\\_com/status/1429871811538341897](https://twitter.com/RT_com/status/1429871811538341897)

<sup>1</sup> [https://twitter.com/RT\\_com/status/1428261701900668931](https://twitter.com/RT_com/status/1428261701900668931)

Another common theme in Russian content was depictions of U.S. leadership, particularly President Joe Biden, as feckless or incompetent. RT official accounts regularly displayed familiar meme formats to parody Biden's knowledge and decision-making.



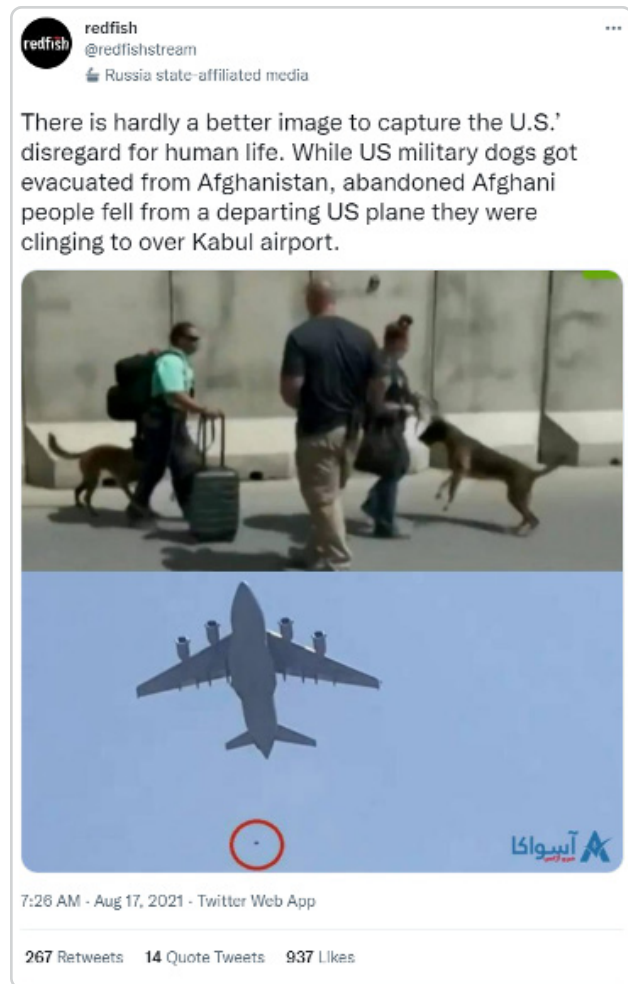
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[https://twitter.com/RT\\_America/status/1429458337150619654](https://twitter.com/RT_America/status/1429458337150619654)



Two of the three most highly-engaged tweets in the dataset were from Redfish, a Kremlin-aligned outlet which styles itself as a progressive, grassroots team of investigative journalists. One of the Redfish tweets displayed an Afghan falling from a plane departing from Kabul, an image that the outlet said best captures “the U.S.’ disregard for human life.” The other was a 2001 video of Hugo Chávez criticizing the U.S. response to 9/11. These tweets received over 1,000 interactions each.



<https://twitter.com/redfishstream/status/1427592710836432897>



<https://twitter.com/redfishstream/status/1428362841862467599>

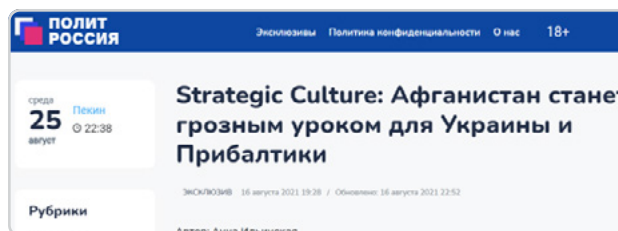
# Russian Gray Propaganda Narratives

A series of fringe websites and blogs with obscure connections to the Russian government, categorized as gray propaganda, serve as complimentary vehicles for Kremlin-aligned narratives. While several related sites present conspiracy theories and opinions from the political fringes, their coverage of Afghanistan has shared several narratives with the Russian state-owned outlets. For example, they emphasize the potential for broader geopolitical and social consequences of failures in U.S. leadership; the Soviet Union's own history of invasion and miscalculation in Afghanistan is largely omitted from these articles. An editorial from the Strategic Culture Foundation excoriates U.S. and NATO performance in Afghanistan and states that "China, Russia and other neighboring nations are best placed to help the Afghan people chart a new direction of independence."<sup>2</sup> The U.S. State Department has reported that The Strategic Culture Foundation is directed by the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service.<sup>3</sup>



Meanwhile, Global Research, which the U.S. State Department in 2020 described as "deeply enmeshed" in Russia's disinformation machine, published multiple articles questioning the justification for war in Afghanistan. These included false claims that Al Qaeda were not behind the attacks of September 11, 2001.<sup>4</sup> One article by Global Research's founder characterized the Taliban's takeover as a U.S.-sponsored "color revolution".<sup>5</sup> A reference to popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes in Ukraine and Georgia in the early 2000s, the term "color revolution" has been co-opted by Kremlin-aligned outlets and conspiracy theorists, who often use it alongside allegations of election fraud and manufactured regime change.

Sources like Strategic Culture are often quoted as authoritative experts in other Russian News outlets, such as a PolitRos article which warns that Afghanistan is a "formidable lesson for Ukraine and the Baltics."<sup>6</sup>



<sup>2</sup> <http://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2021/08/20/another-one-bites-dust-geopolitical-fallout-from-us-afghan-failure/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem\\_08-04-20.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.globalresearch.ca/was-america-attacked-by-afghanistan-on-september-11-2001/5307151>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.globalresearch.ca/afghanistan-color-revolution-narcotics-opium-trade/5753335>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.politros.com/217815-strategic-culture-afghanistan-stanet-groznym-urokom-dlya-ukrainy-i-pribaltiki>

## Chinese State-Aligned Media

Chinese propaganda outlets leveraged the fallout in Afghanistan to advance the narrative that the United States is a failed global power and warned that the United States is incapable of delivering on its security promises. These narratives placed a particular emphasis on international reputation and the opinions of a large Chinese-speaking population abroad, covering public perceptions of the United States role in foreign affairs. During the period of analysis, Twitter posts by Chinese state-affiliated accounts regarding US involvement in Afghanistan received a total of 38,156 Twitter engagements and reached an audience of 197,915,781 followers.

Like the meme compilations posted by RT and Sputnik, Chinese accounts also included humorous responses to the chaos in Kabul. Of the tweets from Chinese state-affiliated media accounts which referenced Afghanistan, the most highly-engaged tweet ridiculed the U.S. presidential transition; the tweet received over 4,800 likes. The same state-affiliated journalist tweeted another “hilarious” image from Chinese social networks: American superheroes waiting to be rescued on an empty Kabul tarmac.



[https://twitter.com/HuXijin\\_GT/status/1426949490380967937](https://twitter.com/HuXijin_GT/status/1426949490380967937)



[https://twitter.com/HuXijin\\_GT/status/1429743295500935170](https://twitter.com/HuXijin_GT/status/1429743295500935170)



Prominent narratives from Chinese media included the moral failing of the U.S.' abandonment of Afghanistan and the unreliability of the U.S. as an international partner. In response to anxieties expressed by Taiwanese social media users who were concerned about the United States' commitment to their own security, a Global Times editorial warned Taiwan that it will suffer a fate similar to Afghanistan's if conflict should arrive in the region; the accompanying cartoon portrayed a bald eagle guiding an unwitting Tsai Ing-wen into a dark pit. CNN also reported that the U.S.' chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan has presented China with a propaganda boost, demonstrated by state-media outlets threatening an invasion of Taiwan.<sup>7</sup> China is leveraging what they determine to be the U.S.' failure in Afghanistan to threaten its neighbor, adding to the chaos surrounding an already incredibly tense relationship.

## Afghan abandonment a lesson for Taiwan's DPP: Global Times editorial

By Global Times

Published: Aug 16, 2021 09:45 PM



<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1231636.shtml>

A Taliban-controlled Afghanistan has significant security implications for neighboring China, and Chinese state narratives emphasize the potentially destabilizing consequences of a refugee crisis. During the analysis period, there were 39 mentions of refugees or immigrants in tweets by Chinese state-media, receiving 1137 engagements on Twitter and reaching an audience of 169,318,866. The refugee crisis was framed with a moral angle, as well: among tweets referencing refugees or immigrants, the top two tweets were a cartoon and a text image (below) which criticized an American reluctance to accept refugees. They emphasized the U.S. should have a moral obligation to the Afghan people.



<https://twitter.com/globaltimesnews/status/1428347206755504129>



<https://twitter.com/globaltimesnews/status/1429801400414838796>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/18/china/china-afghanistan-taiwan-mic-intl-hnk/index.html>



## OUTLOOK

# Internet humor, social wedge issues, and conspiracy theories are powerful tools for guiding public perceptions.

When employed by authoritarian state actors, they can be used to muddy legitimate criticisms surrounding an uncertain and rapidly changing situation like the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. The news storm surrounding Afghanistan provided an opportunity for authoritarian governments to seize on factual information in order to spread familiar narratives about the failings of liberal democracy, as well as to play upon existing social anxieties around the world. As the information environment surrounding the conflict in Afghanistan becomes more saturated and countries around the world grapple with security implications of the Taliban's takeover, it will become even more important to monitor the line between facts and manipulation.

# PROTECT THE TRUTH IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE

Founded in 2019 with the mission to protect the truth, Alethea Group detects and mitigates instances of disinformation and social media manipulation to help clients navigate the new digital reality. Alethea Group is women and disability-owned and operated.



Washington, DC  
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