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VIEWPOINTSOPINION

China's Secret Weapon In The AI Arms Race: American Fear

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Commentary

China's competition with the United States when it comes to artificial intelligence is usually described as a technological arms race, with both countries vying for AI supremacy. This race has generally been defined as the procurement of advanced computer chips, scientific talent, and energy resources.

But a recent report from OpenAI suggests that the competition has another front. According to the company, operatives likely based in China have been using artificial intelligence to manipulate American debates about AI development and public policy.

China is building increasingly competitive AI systems, while China-linked actors attempt to inflame opposition to the infrastructure that supports America's AI industry. If these efforts contribute to restrictive regulations, delayed data centers, and higher operating costs, they could weaken American innovation and make U.S. companies more dependent on cheaper Chinese technology.

The Propaganda Front of the AI Arms Race

In June, OpenAI announced that it had banned two clusters of ChatGPT accounts likely originating in China. The accounts had allegedly been used to support covert influence operations targeting American discussions about AI, data centers, and tariff policy.

One cluster generated social media posts, images, and other materials claiming that AI data centers were raising electricity prices for ordinary families. The second cluster criticized American tariffs as an attempt to dominate global technology. The network also spread false claims that ChatGPT user data had been compromised, seemingly to instigate privacy concerns about AI services.

Although OpenAI found no evidence that these campaigns achieved a significant audience, the operation is significant because it reveals what China-linked actors are testing. OpenAI concluded that the campaign attempted to "exploit and amplify existing public concerns" about electricity prices and the local effects of data-center construction.

Foreign influence campaigns rarely manufacture political disputes from scratch. They identify genuine grievances, emphasize the most inflammatory claims, and use fake accounts to create the appearance of widespread anger.

Russia famously used similar methods through its Internet Research Agency. China has operated online influence networks for decades.

Artificial intelligence makes these operations faster, cheaper, and more scalable. It allows operators to generate content, coordinate accounts, and adapt tactics quickly, contributing to an online environment increasingly shaped by unseen actors pursuing strategic goals.

Exploit Fear to Slow the Competitor

To be clear, concerns about AI and data centers are not imaginary.

AI facilities consume large amounts of electricity and water, raising legitimate questions about costs, infrastructure, and local impacts. Americans also worry about job displacement, surveillance, bias, and corporate power.

These concerns have fueled a growing backlash amongst the public. Polls regularly show this. A May 2026 Economist/YouGov poll found that 71 percent of Americans believe AI development is moving too quickly, with other surveys showing rising pessimism and support for regulation.

That anxiety is already shaping policy. Lawmakers are proposing restrictions on data centers, energy use, and AI applications. Some proposals are reasonable, while others are heavy-handed.

This is why the Chinese influence operation matters. The Chinese regime does not need to convince Americans that AI is dangerous. The regime only needs to amplify distrust enough to delay projects and encourage policies that slow U.S. development.

Even small disruptions can compound. Artificial intelligence depends on computing power and energy, and delays raise costs and shift investment.

Meanwhile, China is advancing through a centralized strategy, with state-backed funds investing hundreds of billions of dollars into the emerging technology.

Beijing is building its industry while China-linked actors test narratives that weaken support for America's AI infrastructure.

America Could Regulate Itself Into Dependence

The danger is even clearer when considering how rapidly China is closing the technological gap. As the AI revolution has taken hold, research has suggested that Chinese AI labs were six to 12 months behind U.S. labs.

According to Stanford University's 2026 AI Index, the performance difference between leading American and Chinese models has "effectively closed." U.S. and Chinese systems have exchanged the lead several times since early 2025.

Chinese models are also gaining users because they are comparatively inexpensive. Recent reporting indicates that companies including DoorDash, Siemens, and Airbnb have experimented with Chinese systems such as DeepSeek.

This creates a troubling feedback loop.

Public hostility makes American AI projects harder to build. Political restrictions will potentially make American models more expensive. Higher costs make cheaper Chinese alternatives more attractive. Greater reliance on Chinese systems gives Beijing's technology ecosystem more influence over the global information economy.

Anyone concerned about ideological bias in American AI should be especially alarmed by this possibility.

DeepSeek and other Chinese models have repeatedly suppressed information about Tiananmen Square, Taiwan, Hong Kong, human rights, and criticism of Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

American AI companies deserve scrutiny when they embed political biases or corporate agendas into their products. Replacing those systems with models developed under the censorship requirements of the Chinese Communist Party would obviously magnify that danger.

Truth Must Be Our North Star

None of this means that every data-center opponent is a Chinese agent or that every criticism of AI is propaganda.

Such claims would be reckless. Many Americans sincerely worry about AI's impact on their jobs, communities, privacy, and families. I share many of these concerns. Big Tech, social media companies in particular, have often aggravated distrust by enforcing ideological bias.

But Americans should also recognize that foreign adversaries can exploit legitimate concerns for strategic purposes.

The United States must remain vigilant toward both concentrated corporate power and foreign manipulation. AI companies should disclose more about their energy use, data practices, model biases, and relationships with government. At the same time, Americans should be sure to check their sources, ensuring that the rhetoric they

engage in is grounded in fact.

The country may ultimately decide that certain AI applications, corporate practices, or data-center projects need limits. Those decisions should emerge from evidence, open debate, and a sober consideration of America's interests.

They cannot be driven by anonymous bot networks, concealed influence operations, or emotionally charged propaganda designed to make Americans fear their own capacity for innovation.

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