Tab 1

Due November 22, 2024

Goal: Raise the public alarm bells about information manipulation, particularly how foreign malign influence campaigns from strategic competitors are being used to spread false information about USAID's programming, staff, and purpose. Provide some of the most eye-popping examples and stats describing the problem and the solutions we've piloted/are proposing on how to better address it. Also explain how AI is impacting each of the below categories.

Examples & data points of FMI campaigns targeting USAID:

Foreign and non-state actors in the countries in which USAID operates overseas are using emerging and existing technologies to manipulate and control information at a higher speed and scale than ever before. Information manipulation by foreign state and non-state actors abroad can have significant and enduring impacts on development and can create direct operational and reputational risk to USAID, including its staff, programs, and implementing partners, especially those working in local contexts. This problem affects USAID across all contexts and all technical sectors—from democracy to critical infrastructure, economic growth and innovation, education, global health, stability, and food security—and can prevent the Agency from achieving its development objectives.

Below are further examples of foreign malign information manipulation campaigns targeting USAID programs, people, and partners.

Global

"The Hypocrisy and Facts of United States Foreign Aid," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (April 19, 2024).
The story: On April 19, 2024, the People's Republic of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) released a publication titled "The Hypocrisy and Facts of the United States Foreign Aid," targeting USAID. The primary aim of this article is to undermine the credibility of U.S. foreign assistance efforts while promoting PRC's aid initiatives as altruistic and beneficial. The MFA has since posted this article on dozens of social media and messaging accounts globally.
→ Content examples: Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe on Twitter; op-ed in the Global Times
The impact: Information Manipulation such as the article will corrode trust in USAID in our partner countries and limit USAID's ability to execute its Mission. Based on recent examples of Russian information operations in West Africa, similar reputational assaults have caused some host country governments to pause or slow down cooperation (e.g. Nigeria following the rumors about USG public health programs). These assaults damage the effectiveness of our foreign assistance programs, and can create doubt and reluctance with intended beneficiaries of that assistance.

Africa

In Africa, Russia has conducted years of aggressive information manipulation efforts to accelerate "anti-colonial" "self-determination" narratives and disaffection with France, and Russian state-backed messengers have sought to lump the United States with that. Reputational attacks on our assistance this year have most visibly been on our USG public health work, whipping up false conspiracy narratives, some old tropes about HIV-AIDS, but also newer ones on malaria and dengue fever, etc. African government reactions have been uneven, with some fairly consistent partners such as Nigeria having paused advancing some work with USAID, and troublesome state agencies like Burkina Faso's Ministry of Health having gone public defending the USG. USAID is often referenced in false narratives alongside DTRA (falsely accused of bio weapons labs globally) and CDC, and we have created a good working relationship with DTRA and their new Office of Information Resilience.

"Russian Intelligence Is Pushing False Claims of U.S. Biological Testing in Africa, U.S. Says," *The Wall Street Journal* (February 8, 2024).
The story: Russian state-backed messengers spread false information about USAID's health work on the African continent. "Russian intelligence agencies are trying to undermine U.S. influence in Africa by spreading disinformation that Africans have been the unwitting test subjects in Pentagon biological research programs and casting aspersions on Western public-health programs, U.S. officials said."
The response: The GEC went public with its efforts to disrupt this campaign with an article in The Wall Street Journal.

"Russia's Latest Target in Africa: U.S.-Funded Anti-Malaria Programs," *The New York Times* (October 14, 2024).
The story: "The scientists sifting through thousands of genetically modified mosquito larvae in a laboratory in Burkina Faso were trying to stop the spread of malaria, one of the biggest killers on the African continent. But in the pro-Russian propaganda telling of their work, the scientists, helped by funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, were not protecting local people against malaria, they were infecting them."
The impact: African government reactions have been uneven, with some fairly consistent partners such as Nigeria pausing some work with USAID, and traditionally troublesome states like Burkina Faso's Ministry of Health publicly defending the U.S. government.

"Putin's Media Blitz on Africa Food Crisis Sparks Alarm in Europe," *Bloomberg* (July 3, 2022); "Russia's Disinformation Cannot Hide its Responsibility for the Global Food Crisis," GEC (June 22, 2022).
The story: "Food insecurity has risen because of Putin's war of choice. It was not caused, as the Kremlin claims, by sanctions that the United States and many other countries have imposed in response to Russia's horrific aggression against Ukraine."
→ Content examples: Russian Embassy in Kenya on Twitter; Sputnik Turkiye
~~(SBU)~~ The response: Please see here. As a result, Vera and LPA launched a proactive food security campaign to address this info manipulation.

Asia

"Is US Plotting Electoral Coup in Solomon Islands?" *Sputnik* (April 9, 2024).
The story: Russian state-backed outlet Sputnik published an "investigation" into USAID's alleged role in "an electoral coup" in the Solomon Islands. Sputnik claimed that it had received a trove of documents from a source with supposed "intimate knowledge" of USAID's activities in the region; however, USAID was able to confirm that several — if not all — of these documents were forged. Following the Sputnik publication, the PRC state-backed outlet Global Times published its own "investigation" on alleged U.S. interference, claiming that "the US and its allies appear to be using 'color revolution' tactics to infiltrate the political landscape of the Solomon Islands." These claims were also amplified by the Solomon Islands' government, and the narrative was picked up by Indonesian media. Following the U.S. Embassy's response, Sputnik and the Global Times, as well as other PRC state-backed actors, doubled down on their claims.
The impact: The impact this narrative had on the results of the election or the perception of USAID is unclear; however, it is noteworthy that this follows up on a 2021 PRC information manipulation campaign against the U.S. government in Solomon Islands that aimed to oust the pro-U.S. premier of Malaita province and generate distrust of the U.S. government and U.S. foreign assistance. Related to this episode, another media partner who was working with us on a strategic communications campaign in the Solomon Islands backed out of the project. It was discovered that they were also working with the PRC.
The response: The U.S. Embassy to Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu released a public statement refuting the false claims. ~~(SBU)~~ Please also see here.

Europe and Eurasia

"Public Health Fakes: USAID supplies drugs to the Ukrainian military," VoxUkraine (September 8, 2023).
The story: "At the end of July and the beginning of August, an information attack against the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) started simultaneously on several platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and YouTube). The authors of fake posts claimed that in a published video, soldiers of the 79th Separate Airborne Assault Brigade of the AFU in Zaporizhzhia were receiving ephedrine from USAID. Some channels refer to ephedrine as a stimulant necessary for producing methamphetamine, while others directly label this substance as a drug. The new video is being attempted to be linked to the old narrative of Russian propaganda about 'combat drugs of the AFU,' which allegedly alleviate pain and boost the combat morale of Ukrainians."
→ Content example: Russian Embassy in Bulgaria on Telegram

"Georgia demands US explain funding potential revolution in country," *TASS Russian News Agency* (October 2, 2023).
The story: In October 2023, the ruling Georgian Dream party falsely accused USAID of plotting a color revolution in the country. Russian state-backed media picked up the story, with TASS

reporting that members of the Georgian Dream party were calling on USAID to "provide clarification on the issue of USAID funding trainings in Georgia that involved Serbian citizens preparing the republic's residents to overthrow the authorities of the country."
The impact: While it cannot be directly traced to a single instance of information manipulation, in May 2024, Georgian Parliament passed a "foreign influence" law, which has made it more difficult for USAID to operate in support of shared development objectives in the country.
The response: On October 26, 2023, in an interview with Civil Georgia, Ambassador Erin Elizabeth McKee, USAID Assistant Administrator for Europe and Eurasia, refuted allegations by the ruling Georgian Dream party that USAID is "funding extremists" in Georgia through Georgian NGO projects.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Colombia
The story: A defamatory video created and circulated by local actors in Colombia accused USAID and local implementing partners of trying to take over the government and influence political processes.
The impact: The video's creators aimed to diminish trust of the United States and our partners. USAID staff and implementing partners were put at risk.
The response: USAID decided not to respond to this instance of information manipulation with a campaign. Because the spread of the video was limited to a relatively small number of people whose online activity remained isolated from the wider public, creating content to counter the narrative may have inadvertently led to the narrative gaining more traction than it otherwise would have.

Middle East

"Intentions," Iran's *Press TV* (September 13, 2023).
The story: In September 2023, Iranian state-backed outlet Press TV produced a documentary-style video arguing that "American organizations such as USAID, USIP, and NED have reached out to the people of the Middle East, trying to maintain their hegemony in the region through their seemingly cultural, humanitarian projects."

Strat comms considerations:

Please see here.

Security considerations:

Please see here and below.

(U) USAID OFFICE OF SECURITY- FOREIGN MALIGN INFLUENCE LIMITED ANALYSIS AND ASSOCIATED CASE EXAMPLES

Last Updated: 21 November 2024

Methodology

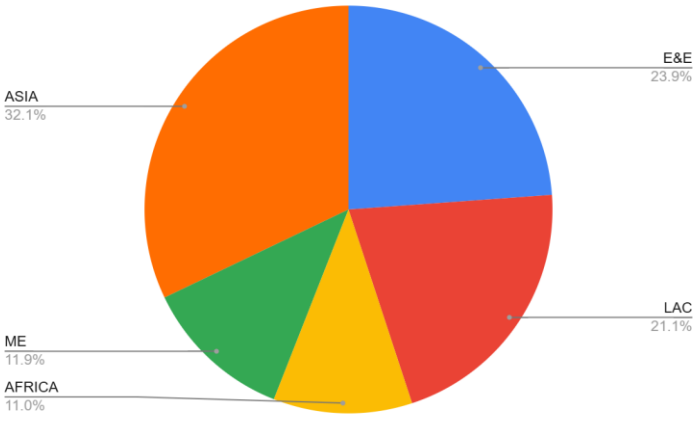
(U) The methodology for this report involved a multi-step approach to identify, analyze, and categorize instances of information manipulation targeting USAID. Key activities included a review of internal reports, social media monitoring, and analysis of third-party media content to trace manipulated information narratives and their origins. Incidents were categorized into security, reputational, and geographical risks, with a focus on identifying actors, goals, and dissemination tactics. Regional trends were mapped, and findings were continuously updated to ensure timely, accurate insights and actionable recommendations.

FMI/IM QUANTITATIVE DATA

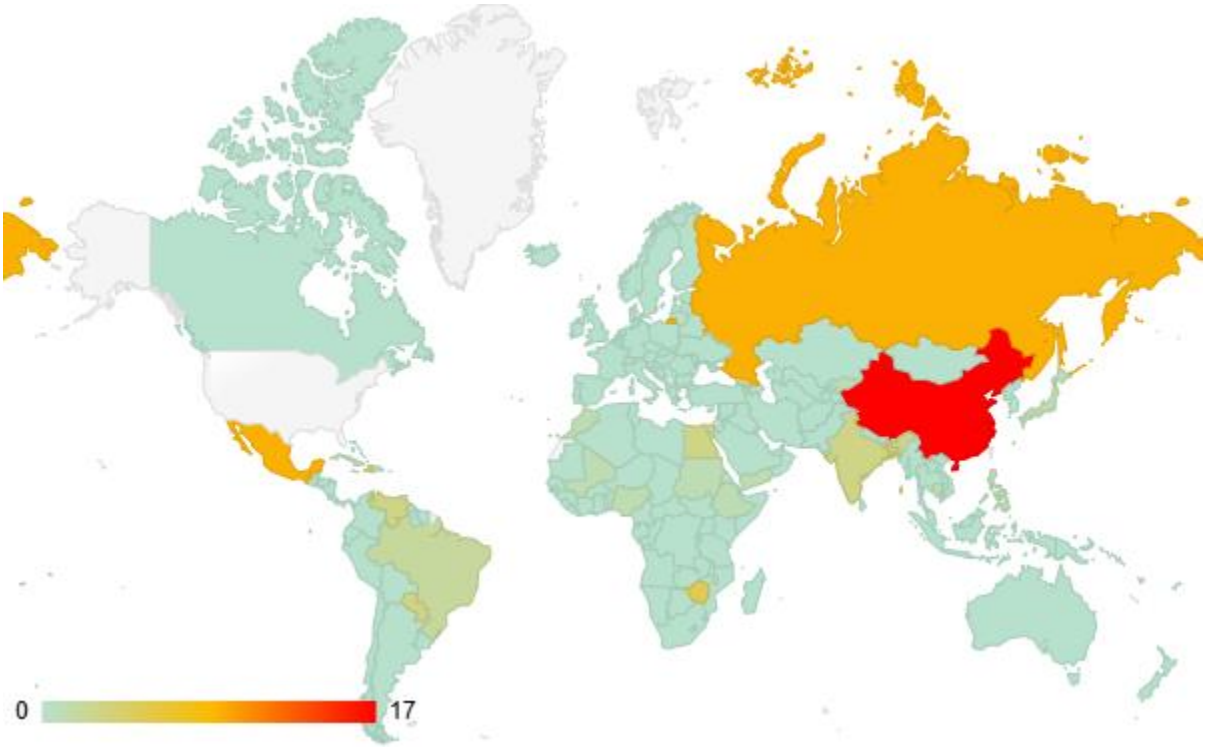
(U) The data presented in this report represents a subset of information manually collected by a single dedicated analyst and covers the period starting from July 2024. As such, this dataset should not be interpreted as exhaustive or fully representative of the volume and diversity of data that may exist in the broader intelligence landscape. Readers are advised to consider this limitation when drawing conclusions or making decisions based on this report.

(U) Data Insights and Visual Analysis

Number of Information Incidents Per Region (as of July 2024)	Total 81
E&E	30
LAC	26
AFRICA	15
ME	16
ASIA	36



1. Geographical Distribution Pie Chart / Heat Map



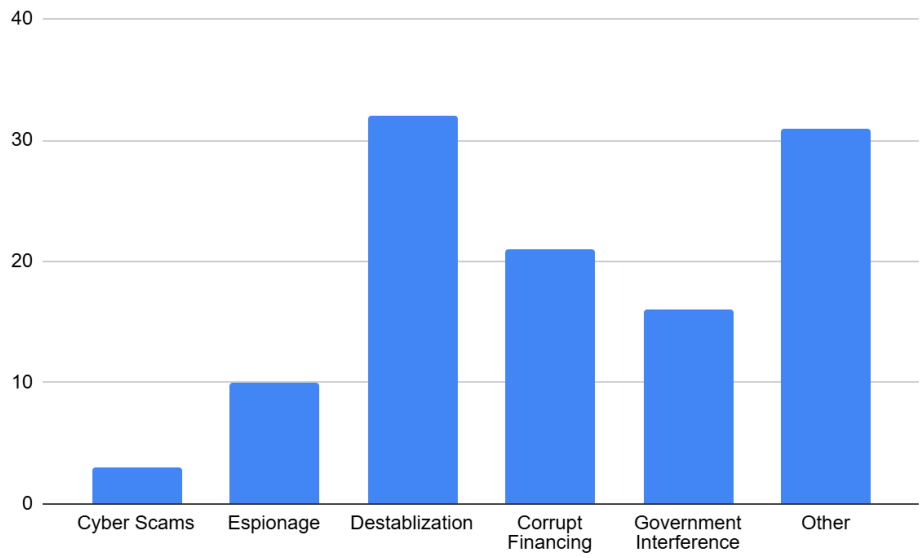
This heat map illustrates the number of information incidents related to Foreign Malign Influence (FMI) identified since July 2024.

Red represents the highest concentration of incidents, with the maximum recorded being **17 incidents** in a single country.

Green signifies no documented incidents, indicating areas with **0 occurrences**.

The gradient between red and green reflects varying levels of reported activity, with colors closer to red indicating higher frequencies of incidents. This visualization highlights geographic patterns in FMI activity to assist in understanding and prioritizing response efforts.

2. Common Narratives - Column Chart



This column chart highlights the primary narratives identified in our monitoring of Foreign Malign Influence (FMI) activity since July 2024. The data is categorized into five key areas:

Government Interference – Claims of USAID meddling in political or governmental affairs.

Espionage – Allegations of USAID engaging in covert intelligence activities.

Destabilization – Narratives accusing USAID of undermining social, political, or economic stability.

Corrupt Financing – Assertions that USAID is involved in fraudulent or unethical funding practices.

Cyber Scams – Instances of digital fraud or phishing attempts falsely attributed to

(U) FIVE CASE EXAMPLES - Security Threats and Exploitation Risks Linked to Information Manipulation Targeting USAID

(U) The analysis of excerpts from five previously reported cases highlight examples of security threats and vulnerabilities tied to suspected Foreign Malign Influence (FMI) that target USAID.

These cases demonstrate how adverse actors ***might*** exploit social media and geopolitical sensitivities to potentially undermine USAID's reputation, operational integrity, and personnel safety.

(U) CASE EXAMPLE # 1 - Central African Republic: NGO Exploitation Risks

Analytic Notes: The following report underscores vulnerabilities in NGO operations in conflict-prone regions. The Central African Republic (CAR) has seen NGOs, including USAID-funded entities, operate under conditions where state authority is weak and foreign actors exert significant influence. This environment is ripe for FMI exploitation by adverse actors, as NGOs may be falsely associated with foreign agendas or become targets for information manipulation. The situation reflects how false narratives could undermine trust in USAID's humanitarian initiatives, potentially reducing local cooperation and increasing operational risks.

Details: Analysts identified concerning reports of manipulated information mentioning the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in the Central African Republic (CAR), in relation to a recent detainment. The detainment of a consultant affiliated with the U.S. NGO FHI360 has sparked a cascade of false narratives, pointing fingers at the U.S. government and USAID, accusing both of nefarious activities. According to the USAID Africa Bureau, the detained individual is not a U.S. citizen and was not working on a USAID project. However, pro-Russian propaganda outlets and various social media platforms have disseminated information, **linking the individual to USAID and alleging espionage activities** intended to destabilize CAR. The spread of these narratives poses a risk to the organization's reputation and operational stability in CAR and potentially other regions in Africa. ***Classified reporting available with additional details.***

Key Findings: The narrative began with a slew of articles from well-known pro-Russian propaganda sites such as Ndjoni Sango, Lengo Songo, and Afrique Media. These sources allege that the individual, a consultant with FHI360 on behalf of USAID, was not only recruiting Fulani individuals to form a terrorist group akin to ISIS but also attempting to bribe members of the Azande Ani Kpigbi militia to cooperate with the U.S. government. This baseless claim has been spreading rapidly, sowing seeds of distrust and fear among the local populace.

An important highlight from this narrative is the conflicting reports surrounding the individual's identity. Some sources describe him as an American, while others label him as an American NGO employee associated with USAID. This lack of clarity and inconsistency is a clear indicator of deliberate information manipulation, designed to create confusion and falsely implicate the U.S. in destabilizing CAR.

(U) A closer look at the sentiment behind these narratives reveals a predominantly negative tone. Most of the content is disseminated in English, with French being the second most common language. This linguistic choice suggests a targeted effort to reach both US and Francophone African audiences, amplifying the negative impact of the false narratives in the region.

The reach of these false narratives extends beyond CAR. In a notable instance, the Ghanaian online news outlet PEACEFMONLINE.COM has also propagated the accusation that USAID was attempting to infiltrate CAR's judicial system. At this time, analysts are not clear on whether this news outlet is affiliated with any other foreign government or has a history of pushing foreign malign information. However, this regional spread indicates a broader strategy to undermine USAID's reputation across Africa, highlighting the pervasive nature of this information campaign.

Despite the widespread dissemination of these damaging narratives, the assessment did not identify immediate threats to USAID personnel or programs in CAR. The primary objective of these false claims appears to focus on undermining USAID's reputation and credibility rather than inciting direct harm to its staff. Nevertheless, the potential for reputational damage and operational disruptions cannot be underestimated. As such, analysts will continue to monitor online narratives and activity for negative mentions of USAID in relation to CAR.

This incident sheds light on the **sophisticated and multi-faceted nature of foreign malign influence campaigns targeting USAID in CAR.** The deliberate spread of ambiguous information, conflicting reports, and negative sentiment pose significant challenges to USAID's mission and operations.

SOURCING: Sourcing information for this report is derived from advanced data and analytics provided by Babel Street, a global information intelligence platform utilized to monitor trends, identify patterns, and enhance decision-making in identity, threat, and risk mitigation operations. Additionally, insights were supplemented by field reports, contributions from employed field personnel, and reporting from a humanitarian association that supports aid agencies, healthcare providers, educators, protection services, and other civil society organizations by delivering publicly available information to inform evidence-based policies.

(U) CASE EXAMPLE # 2 - Zimbabwe: Hostile Narratives Against USAID

(U) Analytic Notes: The summary report on Zimbabwe reveals a multi-faceted disinformation campaign targeting USAID. Narratives around a fatal car accident, alleged espionage, nepotism,

and calls for expelling USAID from Zimbabwe demonstrate how isolated incidents can be weaponized to erode USAID's credibility. The accusation of regime change support aligns with broader FMI strategies to portray USAID as an agent of Western interference. These narratives, if amplified, could jeopardize USAID's projects by diminishing local trust, increasing resistance, and potentially endangering personnel.

(U) Details: Prior to a visit of the USAID Africa Bureau to Zimbabwe, SEC identified four concerning narratives on social media and online content that have the potential to adversely affect the perception of USAID in the region. These narratives highlight potential risks to USAID's reputation and the effectiveness of its ongoing and future projects in Zimbabwe. The identified issues range from a fatal car accident involving a USAID-affiliated vehicle to broader accusations of espionage, nepotism, and calls for the expulsion of USAID from the country. These findings suggest a growing mistrust and hostility towards USAID's presence and activities in Zimbabwe.

(U) Key Findings:

1. **(U) USAID-Related Fatal Road Accident in Chipinge**

   A news article titled "USAID car accident kills a Zimbabwean in Chipinge" on the local news website Bulawayo24 reported a fatal road accident involving a vehicle associated with a USAID-funded project. The Zimbabwean driver, an employee of an implementing partner organization, was involved in the incident. The project team is cooperating with police and local officials. This incident has the potential to generate negative sentiments towards USAID, particularly if it is perceived as a result of negligence or poor oversight.

2. **(U) Allegations of USAID Supporting Regime Change**

   Online sentiments expressed by some locals suggest that USAID's projects are perceived as being focused on regime change in Zimbabwe. These claims have been exacerbated by recent allegations that a USAID-supported spy ring was busted and deported from Zimbabwe. This narrative feeds into a broader distrust of USAID's intentions in the country and could lead to increased resistance to USAID initiatives.

3. **(U) Accusations of Nepotism**

   Analysts identified anti-USAID sentiments on social media accusing the organization of supporting nepotism in Zimbabwe. While no specific evidence or context was provided, this allegation contributes to a broader narrative that USAID is covertly interfering in

Zimbabwe's government. Such accusations, even when unfounded, can undermine the legitimacy of USAID's work and erode trust among the local population.

4. **(U) Call for Action Against USAID**

   A call for action was found on social media urging the cessation of all USAID activities in Zimbabwe, the closure of the US Embassy in Harare, and the expulsion of all USAID personnel from the country. The post also called for Zimbabweans in the US to return home. This post reflects an extreme anti-USAID sentiment and suggests a potential risk of escalation in public opposition to USAID's presence in Zimbabwe.

Impact Assessment: The identified narratives present a risk to USAID's operations and reputation in Zimbabwe. The fatal road accident, while seemingly an isolated incident, could be used to fuel negative perceptions of USAID as negligent or careless. Allegations of espionage, regime change, and nepotism contribute to an image of USAID as an external force attempting to interfere in Zimbabwean affairs, which can undermine local support for USAID projects. The call for action to expel USAID from Zimbabwe is particularly concerning, as it suggests a potential mobilization of public sentiment against the organization. If these narratives gain traction, they could lead to increased resistance to USAID initiatives, decreased cooperation from local partners, and potential safety risks for USAID personnel on the ground.

SOURCING: Sourcing information for this report is derived from advanced data and analytics provided by Babel Street, a global information intelligence platform utilized to monitor trends, identify patterns, and enhance decision-making in identity, threat, and risk mitigation operations.

(U) CASE EXAMPLE # 3 - Venezuela: Coup Allegations and Russian Amplification

(U) Analytic Notes: The report on Venezuela details of what appears to be an organized information manipulation campaign accusing USAID of orchestrating a coup during controversial presidential elections. Russian and Venezuelan state media, along with coordinated social media troll accounts, amplify these false narratives to frame USAID as a destabilizing force. This case highlights the intersection of geopolitical rivalry and FMI tactics, where USAID becomes a target in broader anti-Western propaganda efforts. The allegations not only risk USAID's reputation but also foster hostility in a politically volatile region.

Details: Analysts identified online narratives accusing USAID of supporting a coup in Venezuela, coinciding with the controversial presidential elections. These claims, likely driven by a foreign influence operations, allege USAID's involvement in destabilization efforts. The narratives are

being amplified by Russian and Venezuelan state media, as well as possible coordinated troll accounts on social media.

Key Findings: In the past three weeks, there has been a significant increase in online content accusing USAID and other Western NGOs of supporting a coup in Venezuela. This surge in hostile messaging appears closely tied to the recent Venezuelan presidential elections, where both President Nicolás Maduro and opposition candidate Edmundo González claimed victory. Despite exit polls indicating an opposition win, Venezuela's electoral authority announced Maduro's re-election with 51% of the vote, leading to widespread controversy and international criticism, particularly from Western nations and the Biden Administration, regarding the fairness of the electoral process.

The possible uptick in anti-US rhetoric targeting USAID coincides with this international backlash and appears to be part of a broader narrative, suggesting that USAID collaborated in orchestrating a large-scale operation involving terrorism, cyberattacks, and psychological warfare to destabilize Venezuela. Notably, this narrative aligns with known Russian influence tactics, as Russia considers Venezuela a key ally in Latin America. Russian state media, especially RT in Spanish, and Venezuelan state-run channels like Venezolana de Televisión (VTV), have increasingly amplified false narratives, **portraying the United States as an imperialist aggressor while casting Russia as a defender of the oppressed**.

Analysts have identified several instances of **claims mentioning USAID coup involvement** in Venezuela spreading across social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, as well as on public media channels like SouthFront, a site linked to Russian influence operations. One particular piece of content, linked to SouthFront, claimed that opposition forces set fire to a USAID truck on the Venezuelan border. Analysts are currently vetting this claim and will provide an update on the findings. However, the social media profiles propagating these messages display characteristics typical of troll accounts, such as anonymous identities, high levels of activity, repetitive posting, and coordination in spreading similar narratives.

SOURCING: Sourcing information for this report is derived from advanced data and analytics provided by Babel Street, a global information intelligence platform utilized to monitor trends, identify patterns, and enhance decision-making in identity, threat, and risk mitigation operations.

(U) CASE EXAMPLE # 4 - Kyrgyzstan: USAID Staff Targeted via Social Media

Analytic Notes: The analysis of the Telegram channel "Ачуу чындык" demonstrates how FMI actors exploit social media platforms to spread disinformation targeting USAID personnel, such as Mission Director Sara Werth. Allegations of CIA connections and military affiliations, despite lacking evidence, aim to delegitimize USAID's humanitarian efforts. While there are no immediate threats, the high engagement rate of the channel suggests a risk of narrative escalation. This example illustrates how misinformation can isolate USAID representatives and hinder their ability to build trust with local stakeholders.

Details: This report analyzes the content and impact of a Telegram channel named “Ачуу чындык” (translated as “Bitter Truth”), which recently published posts concerning Sara Werth, the USAID Mission Director for Kyrgyzstan. The channel, which poses as a media outlet but resembles an independent blog, has shared allegations about Ms. Werth's professional background, claiming that she is connected to the CIA and has a military role, contrary to her publicly listed experience with the Peace Corps.

(U) Key Findings: The “Ачуу чындык” Telegram channel is relatively active, with 2.1k followers, 176 average post views, and an engagement rate of 5%, which is higher than the typical 2%-3% seen on social media. The channel predominantly uses Kyrgyz and Russian, and has amassed 6,135 total posts. This indicates a sustained presence with a high level of interaction, making it an influential platform for shaping narratives within certain circles.

The posts in question allege that the USAID Mission Director’s (Sara Werth)background includes military service and connections to the CIA, rather than solely humanitarian work. The posts reference the National Defense University’s website to support claims that she holds the rank of a military colonel with the goal of shaping foreign policy. Additionally, the channel suggests that her work in Kyrgyzstan is focused on promoting democracy under the guise of economic and humanitarian projects.

(U) Further investigation identified a YouTube channel affiliated with “Ачуу чындык,” with 1.71k subscribers, 359 videos, and 170,955 views. The channel’s registered location is Poland, and it was established on March 8, 2022. The existence of multiple platforms suggests a coordinated effort to amplify the messaging, though no direct analysis of the channel’s content was conducted. A TikTok account was also found, but its contents remain unanalyzed.

Independent searches of Kyrgyz and Russian media outlets yielded 42 sites mentioning Sara Werth, none of which appeared nefarious or suggestive of harmful intent. This indicates that while the Telegram posts may attempt to shape perceptions, they have not been widely echoed in mainstream media. At this time, there are no direct threats or signs of targeting towards Sara Werth or the USAID Mission in Kyrgyzstan. Although the posts contain information that may not

be factually accurate, there is no immediate evidence of threats of harm or incitement related to these claims.

The “Ачуу чындык” channel is actively disseminating unverified claims about Sara Werth, casting doubt on her humanitarian credentials and suggesting covert military affiliations. However, despite the questionable accuracy of these claims, there is no indication that these posts are part of a larger coordinated campaign to harm Ms. Werth or her mission. The channel’s reach, coupled with its high engagement rate, does warrant continued monitoring to assess whether these narratives gain further traction or escalate into more serious threats.

SOURCING: Sourcing information for this report is derived from advanced data and analytics provided by Babel Street, a global information intelligence platform utilized to monitor trends, identify patterns, and enhance decision-making in identity, threat, and risk mitigation operations. Additionally, insights were supplemented by field reports and contributions from employed personnel.

(U) CASE EXAMPLE # 5 - Information Manipulation Campaign Targeting USAID Personnel

(U) Analytic Notes: The findings on USAID personnel being targeted in Yemen highlight how false narratives not only erode trust but also pose significant security risks (i.e. being accused of espionage in a foreign country can result in harassment, detention, or severe penalties like imprisonment). This jeopardizes the safety of USAID personnel, making them targets of local hostility and legal action, and threatens the viability of their humanitarian work.

Details: This report details the ongoing information manipulation campaign aimed at discrediting USAID and its personnel by spreading narratives that accuse the organization of espionage activities. This specific campaign alleges USAID embeds spies within its operations, undermining its humanitarian missions. The report identifies the scope and impact of these disinformation narratives, particularly focusing on a list of named individuals and analyzing their digital footprint and exposure.

The campaign against USAID has primarily spread through social media platforms, online discussion forums, and various news websites, both national and foreign. At this time it does not appear as if there is virality to the ongoing claims due to limited engagement on social media posts. The narrative asserts that USAID is a front for espionage operations, with specific personnel allegedly acting as spies. Despite thorough investigation, no personal information or evidence has been found to substantiate these claims against the listed individuals.

The individuals named have minimal digital footprints, with no personal information available to put them at significant risk. The campaign's persistence and the involvement of various media outlets highlight the need for continuous monitoring and proactive communication strategies to protect USAID's reputation.

The following names are USAID personnel whose names have been reported for being mentioned in the false narratives:

1. Sofia Quesada
2. Cybill Sigler
3. Christopher Jennings
4. Julie Pekowski
5. Jennifer Link
6. Elizabeth Feary
7. Todd Sorenson
8. Brittany Gleixner-Hayat
9. Julie Koenen
10. Mei Mei Peng
11. Oddo Oghale
12. Andrew Plitt

Digital Footprint Analysis: SEC conducted searches across more than 15 social media platforms, various discussion forums, and dark web sources. The results are as follows:

- **Social Media Platforms:** No significant or sensitive personal information was found related to the listed individuals. Their digital footprints are minimal, and no posts or profiles suggest involvement in espionage activities.
- **Discussion Forums:** Searches yielded zero results; there were no mentions or discussions involving the listed individuals.
- **Dark Web:** Analysts conducted several searches using variations of the individuals' names and found nothing significant that could pose a risk or threaten them.

Media Outlets Spreading False Messaging: SEC identified that the campaign against USAID has been amplified by both foreign and national news sites, with several articles contributing to the spread of the false narrative. The following media outlets were identified:

Foreign News Sites:

- PressTV (Iran)
- The Times of Israel

- Middle East Monitor
- Saba Yemen
- Ava Press (Afghan Voice Agency)
- Islamic Republic News Agency
- ABNA News Agency
- Yemen Press Agency

National News Sites:

- The Washington Post
- ABC News

Analysis of IM Spread: According to analysts findings, the disinformation campaign's primary tactic appears to sow doubt about USAID's humanitarian work by labeling its employees as spies, continuing an aged narrative that USAID works alongside spy agencies. This narrative continues to gain traction primarily through foreign news outlets, with rare moments of national sites amplifying the stories. The intention appears to be to undermine USAID's credibility in the region and disrupt its operations by causing mistrust among the populations it serves.

UPDATES OF 22 AUG 24: The report on information manipulation targeting USAID personnel has evolved since its last update in June 2024. New findings indicate that the information manipulation campaign, which accuses USAID of embedding spies within its operations, has continued efforts to expand/maintain its reach, especially within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The campaign has been fueled by an increased number of local news broadcasts and articles from regional news outlets, particularly in Yemen, which continue to amplify the false narrative.

Recent analyses highlight that the false information spread has become more coordinated, leveraging both traditional media and social media platforms. The content has become more tailored to specific regional audiences to increase distrust in USAID's humanitarian efforts. Despite these developments, the digital footprints of the named USAID personnel in the initial report remain minimal, with no new personal information being exposed that could increase their risk. However, new personnel information is noted for this update.

Key Findings: Analysts identified an additional article on Al Masirah titled, *Foreign Intelligence Networks Undermining Yemen's Sovereignty: The Role of USAID's RGP Project and NDI.* This article is an example of a targeted campaign against USAID by accusing it of being involved in a broader foreign intelligence operation aimed at destabilizing Yemen. The article makes several claims to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of USAID's initiatives in Yemen, particularly

the "RGP Project," by portraying it as a tool for espionage and subversion rather than a genuine development effort.

Additionally, the article claims that the "RGP Project" exacerbated social and political tensions, fueled corruption, and contributed to regional instability. It asserts that the project was mismanaged and exploited for illicit purposes, further casting doubt on USAID's role in Yemen.

It should also be noted that the article declared a link to USAID and a supposed spy network associated with the CIA and Israeli Mossad, the article suggests that **USAID's activities in Yemen were part of a larger intelligence operation** which supports the claims mentioned in the initial report.

Additional Individuals Targeted: Separate from the identified article, the ME Mission has reported that additional USAID staff have been implicated as alleged members of the spy ring. Analysts have conducted comprehensive social media searches in both English and Arabic for these individuals and variations of their names to identify any additional targeted messaging or narratives surrounding them.

The following names are additional USAID personnel whose names have been reported for being mentioned in the false narratives:

1. Allison Minor
2. Herbert (Herbie) Smith
3. Tammy Hermez Sanchez (no record)

Digital Footprint Analysis: SEC conducted thorough searches across over 15 social media platforms, various discussion forums, and dark web sources. The findings are as follows:

- **Social Media Platforms:** No significant or sensitive personal information related to the listed individuals was discovered. Their digital footprints are minimal, with no posts or profiles personating them or claims of any involvement in espionage activities.
- **Discussion Forums:** The searches yielded no results; there were no mentions or discussions involving the listed individuals.
- **Dark Web:** Multiple searches using variations of the individuals' names revealed no significant information that could pose a risk or threat to them.

SOURCING: Sourcing information for this report is derived from advanced data and analytics provided by Babel Street, a global information intelligence platform utilized to monitor trends, identify patterns, and enhance decision-making in identity, threat, and risk mitigation

operations. Additionally, insights were supplemented by field reports and contributions from employed personnel.

(U) ADDITIONAL POTENTIAL SECURITY AND SAFETY RISK CASE SUMMARIES

(U) Increased Hostility Towards Personnel

- **Additional Reporting:**
    - Humanitarian Aid Discourse In Burkina Faso
    - Social Media Monitoring and Aid in the Context of the Libyan Flooding Disaster
    - Viral Allegations Against IP in Burkina Faso
- **Risks:** The reports highlight findings of hostility towards humanitarian personnel driven by information manipulation and the online amplification of negative narratives. In Burkina Faso, social media discussions about aid organizations, including USAID, revealed predominantly positive sentiment but also notable negative reactions. These were often triggered by edited media and manipulative information campaigns, with accusations ranging from espionage to insufficient investment. Most hostility emerged in comment sections, reflecting either possible genuine opinions or targeted information manipulation strategies. At this time, analysts are unable to determine which one. Similarly, in the aftermath of Storm Daniel in Libya, anti-USAID sentiment surged online, particularly on Facebook, where groups promoting opposition to USAID activities were identified. Despite no immediate threats of violence, these narratives raise safety risks for USAID/BHA staff, necessitating ongoing monitoring.

  In another instance, a possible implementing partner, the Burkinabè Red Cross faced viral allegations of complicity in jihadist attacks following false claims that it had prior knowledge of an assault and withdrew staff from the area. These allegations, spread through WhatsApp and Facebook, significantly undermined trust in humanitarian organizations. Although the Red Cross publicly denied the claims, the widespread belief in these accusations eroded public confidence, complicating aid delivery and local cooperation.

  Across all cases, information manipulation campaigns weaponize social media to damage the credibility of humanitarian organizations and foster distrust. The amplification of false narratives on online platforms creates an environment of hostility,

exposing personnel to psychological stress, reputational harm, and potential physical threats.

(U) Narratives Linking USAID to Espionage

- **Additional Reporting:**
    - Russian Claims Against USAID Implementing Partners
    - Unveiling Foreign Malign Influence Narratives: Targeting FHI 360-USAID in the Central African Republic
    - Summary Report: Zimbabwe Anti-USAID Narratives
    - Venezuela: Claims of USAID Supporting a Coup
- **Risks:** The reports collectively demonstrate how allegations of espionage and covert influence operations against USAID and its implementing partners heighten risks to personnel and operations. In Zimbabwe, narratives accusing USAID of supporting regime change and operating a spy network have fueled calls for the expulsion of USAID and its staff from the country. These claims, though unsubstantiated, contribute to growing mistrust and hostility, increasing the potential for personnel to face legal action or violence if these narratives gain further traction. Similarly, in the Central African Republic, a consultant affiliated with FHI360 became the subject of false accusations of espionage, with manipulated narratives suggesting U.S. involvement in destabilizing the region. This case underscores how pro-Russian propaganda and ambiguous reporting amplify hostility, posing reputational and operational risks.

  In Venezuela, claims alleging USAID's involvement in a coup have been amplified by state media and coordinated online campaigns. Narratives accuse USAID of orchestrating terrorism, cyberattacks, and psychological warfare, painting the organization as a tool of imperialist aggression. This rhetoric not only erodes trust in USAID’s humanitarian mission but also places staff at risk of retaliation, legal repercussions, or targeted violence.

  In Russia, accusations that USAID initiatives, such as the educational All Children Succeeding Activity in Uzbekistan, serve as fronts for recruiting “agents of influence” highlight how malign information manipulation aims to discredit legitimate aid efforts. While no evidence supports these claims, they align with a broader strategy to undermine Western NGOs and create an environment of suspicion and hostility. The underlying theme in all cases is the use of information manipulation to portray humanitarian projects as fronts for espionage or covert influence. Such allegations increase the risk of staff being detained, harassed, or subjected to violence, especially in

regions where governments or local populations are predisposed to distrust foreign aid organizations.

(U) ADDITIONAL POTENTIAL REPUTATIONAL AND BRANDING RISK CASE SUMMARIES

(U) False Allegations of Political Interference

- **Additional Reporting:**
  - Examining China Daily News Accusations against USAID and CNN News
  - Analytical Report on PRC Messaging Concerning USAID's Humanitarian Efforts in Sudan
- **Risks:** The reports highlight how accusations of political interference could threaten USAID's reputation and brand, particularly in regions with strong foreign influence operations. In Sudan, PRC-backed media narratives portray USAID's humanitarian initiatives as politically motivated, framing them as an infringement on Sudanese sovereignty. This messaging, aligned with Sudan's rhetoric of self-reliance, casts USAID as a foreign actor undermining local governance. Such narratives erode trust among local communities and governments, fostering resentment and opposition to USAID's projects. This reputational risk is compounded by the potential for stricter regulations, reduced access for personnel, and challenges in securing partnerships, limiting USAID's operational effectiveness in the region

  Similarly, China Daily's accusations against USAID allege that it funds disinformation campaigns to suppress Chinese media outlets, such as its TikTok account, Media Unlocked. These claims, though baseless, are part of a broader strategy to discredit USAID by portraying it as a manipulative entity pursuing political aims. While these narratives currently have limited engagement, they reach significant audiences, amplifying the potential for long-term reputational harm. Such efforts distract from USAID's humanitarian objectives and create skepticism about its intentions, making it more challenging to maintain credibility and trust globally

  Collectively, these narratives reflect a pattern of information manipulation that seeks to undermine USAID's integrity by casting its efforts as politically driven rather than altruistic. This poses risks to the agency's brand, complicates its ability to deliver aid, and potentially disrupts its relationships with host nations.

(U) Claims of Aid Mismanagement and Corruption

- **Additional Reporting:**
  - Analysis of Foreign Malign Influence and Information Manipulation in Georgia
  - Report on Sputnik Article "USAID Failing to Monitor Ukraine Aid Programs Thoroughly"
- **Risks:** The reports underscore how allegations of aid mismanagement and corruption pose reputational and branding risks to USAID, particularly in politically and socially sensitive contexts. In Ukraine, a Sputnik article criticized USAID's oversight of aid programs, claiming a failure to monitor the effective use of funds. This narrative selectively highlighted perceived inefficiencies without offering a balanced perspective, fostering a skewed perception among readers. Disseminated across multiple platforms, including VK and Facebook, the narrative gained traction, inciting negative sentiment.

  Similarly, in Georgia, anti-USAID rhetoric emerged amidst the controversial Transparency of Foreign Influence law. Narratives accused USAID of funding protests through IREX, framing the agency as interfering in local politics. These allegations tap into broader suspicions that USAID serves as a front for covert operations, compounding local mistrust. Although these claims have not yet gained significant traction, they align with a long-standing narrative of USAID misusing funds for political manipulation, which could undermine its credibility and partnership potential in the region.

  These claims of mismanagement and corruption not only tarnish USAID's reputation but also risk diminishing local and international support for its initiatives. Such narratives can foster resistance from host governments, skepticism among aid recipients, and reluctance from stakeholders to collaborate, ultimately hindering USAID's ability to fulfill its mission effectively.

Coordination with the Private Sector:

We recognize that information manipulation and foreign malign influence have spread on social media, and AI is amplifying the speed and scale of this online threat. Below are a few examples

of how foreign malign actors have used AI to manipulate information — sometimes going against AI companies' own policies.

- Ahead of Moldova's October 2024 election, Russian state-backed actors produced deepfake videos of President Maia Sandu in an attempt to undercut her support.
- Pro-PRC, AI-generated "news anchors" attempted to sway the Taiwanese presidential election in May 2024.
- In the lead-up to the Indonesian election in February 2024, now-President Prabowo Subianto, the former Defense Minister who is accused of abusing human rights during the Suharto era, successfully rebranded himself as a "cuddly grandpa" using generative AI.

While we do not have explicit evidence or metrics about how AI has been used to target USAID's programs, people, or partners, given the growing prevalence of AI, we suspect that it is being exploited to spread information manipulation on social media channels targeting USAID.

We also acknowledge the essential role that technology companies play in addressing the threat of information manipulation. USAID has partnered with technology companies to strengthen development outcomes and address foreign malign information manipulation through several initiatives:

- The Advancing Digital Democracy (ADD) Academy builds upon the ADD initiative announced at the first Summit for Democracy. In partnership with multinational technology companies, ADD Academy will offer essential skills training in cybersecurity, data privacy, cloud computing, and responsible AI, among other topics. In the initial phase, ADD Academy intends to work with anchor technology partners Cloudflare, Google, and Microsoft.
- In Indonesia, USAID partnered with a local technology company to create Gali Fakta, an award-winning game that teaches players online literacy skills.

Opportunities for Future Policy Interventions:

To meet the challenges posed by foreign malign information manipulation, USAID must increase its investments in affirmative strategic communications. USAID's impact in partner countries is not going to be as effective as it can be unless we can show citizens the impact of our work. It is essential that we meet people where they are and tell our story in a way that speaks to them. To do so, we need to better understand where our audience gets their news in each country, and we need to equip DOCs with the tools and skills to reach these audiences and to show the benefits that USAID is delivering.

Beyond equipping DOCs, we need to equip the entire USAID workforce and our partners with a greater understanding of media literacy, digital literacy, and AI, so they are prepared both to recognize information manipulation and to respond to it through strategic communications and effective programming - especially when they themselves are targeted.

Furthermore, USAID, and the U.S. government more broadly, needs to hold threat actors accountable. We should continue to push for greater interagency coordination on foreign malign influence. When appropriate and when it advances the United States' national security objectives, we should push to expose foreign information manipulation and declassify intelligence in order to put foreign malign state actors on notice.

Investing in the media and technology spaces in partner countries is also essential. Foreign malign actors including the PRC are investing in media and technology companies in developing countries around the world — including in Zambia, Peru, and Nigeria — which puts freedom of speech, citizens' data, and U.S. national security at risk. The PRC is signing MOUs with many of our development partners and is investing in technology infrastructure to give citizens access to technology as a way to control and surveil citizens. When the PRC and other foreign malign actors control the technology and media space, they are equally capable of spreading manipulated content against USAID staff, partners, and programs. This is why investing in initiatives like the Advancing Digital Democracy Initiative is critical to countering the PRC and other foreign malign adversaries.

USAID's competitive advantage is our development model. The Agency is improving outcomes for people around the world across all sectors, ranging from energy to governance, food security to conflict prevention, and so on. By investing in policy interventions to counter foreign malign information manipulation that is targeted at USAID specifically (and that of our partners), USAID will not only be able to continue its work; it will also be able to improve public perception of its work, opening up new opportunities for collaboration with the people we hope to reach.

Opportunities and Risks of a Public Engagement:

Opportunities:

- This issue is going to get worse, and get more sophisticated. We should set up the next administration to appreciate this problem, be persuaded to support continued work on it, and finish building what we have identified as key gaps in our OKR recommendations, most especially to USAID programs, partners, and people.
- Many of our peer development donor colleagues, bilateral and multilateral, are further behind than USAID in getting organized and arriving at their convictions for how this affects development, and how development assistance can be part of the response. *However, we have a big opportunity to prompt and then learn from our peer development donor counterparts debates, and possibly shape a larger global development response awareness and response effort.*
- *Making a public announcement on this issue (speech or op-ed) will also signal to our Allies and adversaries how important it is to address this issue when iM/ FMI targets the Allied development agenda - and it is the development agenda, that can make a significant difference on the ground in shaping USAID partner countries for a better future.*

- One exception noting where a partner is far ahead of USAID is in the strategic communications space, where the EU International Partnerships (EU/INTPA) that manages development funding has a large flexible core budget at headquarters of approximately $30 million specifically for communications campaigns, and has also set aside significant budgets within their bilateral funding specifically for strategic communications that dwarf what USAID has available for DOCs. EU/INTPA also invested in regular country-level sentiment analysis so they can track trends, and track narratives across media/social media. They are where we want to be if we can overcome resource and capacity constraints.

Risks:

- A public speech so close to the end of this administration runs the risk of making information manipulation/information integrity and resilience be perceived as a partisan issue that is a priority for this administration and less welcome in the next. We are still dealing with the 1st amendment misconceptions, and the GEC appears to be a victim of that distrust.
- We believe the information manipulation issues should and probably will motivate a national security coordination and response need in the next administration, but will a public event or an oped by A/AID with a highly visible Biden administration official help or hurt that compared to senior level handover conversations with the incoming team? Frankly, a “mic drop” moment probably won’t help our goal. It’s laudable to go public and call it out like our other USG exposures, and there is great value, but is it worth the politicization risk when there already are House Judiciary Committee and private litigation inquiries that have created a chilling effect on our staff?
- For the career staff who see the development damage information manipulation causes to our U.S. taxpayer-funded activities and relationships, what’s the best way to protect that attention and nascent effort with a new team coming into USAID?