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MEMORANDUM FOR National Security Council Principals Committee

CC: Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer; Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell; Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi; Senate Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy

SUBJECT: Social Media & Weaponization of Information

1. Issue: The purpose of this memorandum is to reduce the capability of foreign adversaries to weaponize social media to influence US narratives.

2. Strategic Analysis: Social media has given rise to endemic disinformation to the benefit of foreign adversaries. Disinformation has the potential to exacerbate domestic polarization within the United States, but it also influences international outcomes through the manipulation of international and cross-cultural perceptions. Using their complex understanding of American social and cultural vulnerabilities, Russia and China amplify disinformation by exploiting algorithms and deploying fake accounts and other mechanisms provided by social media companies. As American democratic values erode, in part because of disinformation it is necessary to intervene urgently in order to prevent further damage to citizens' and allies' trust in American institutions.

3. Relevant National Interests: Social media and the weaponization of information pose a significant threat to three sectors of national interest. These sectors are:

a. *Maintaining the International Rules-Based Order* – Due to its centrality in promoting heightened connectivity in the face of globalization, social media is a critical component in maintaining the rules-based order. Foreign adversaries have successfully utilized social media to weaponize information, compromising voting systems, spreading mis-/dis-information, and targeting public infrastructure.

b. *Safeguarding American Democracy* – US foreign adversaries, such as Russia and China, have leveraged social media to undermine the credibility of candidates and the political system by disseminating political messaging targeted at key social cleavages in the American voting base. Ensuring US election integrity is essential to safeguarding American democracy.

c. *Leading the Way in Technological Innovation* – It is critical for the US to stay ahead of the curve in technological innovation to adeptly safeguard and strengthen the data security of Americans, as well as mitigate the targeting of critical social cleavages

that further polarize the citizenry. Engaging social media companies can help promote US influence, as well as provide a strategy to respond to expansive foreign intrusions in the cyber realm.

4. Strategic Options: To respond to the efforts of foreign actors weaponizing information most effectively there are three strategies to consider. The first is to restore trust in American media outlets. Second is to combat and reduce disinformation spreading into the United States. The third option is to encourage cooperation between global entities.

a. *Addressing the Spread of Mis/Disinformation:* In order to effectively reduce the capability of foreign adversaries to weaponize social media against US narratives, it is essential for the US to limit the rapid spread of harmful misinformation and disinformation on social media. This strategic option will lead to the increase in security for democratic elections, increased trust in institutions, and more cooperation between governments and social media companies. Moreover, this option provides a low-cost solution that has the greatest potential to improve the day-to-day lives of American citizens. Addressing disinformation has the ability to adapt to the strategic challenges that will arise and intensify in the coming decade as well as the capability to incorporate more actors than just the United States government (such as the private sector and other like-minded countries). Despite the many benefits of taking up this strategic option, it may be liable to criticism by constitutional rights defenders and may incite belief that the government is infringing on civil liberties. Furthermore, this option would require the government to define who the authority would be on determining how to limit and when to limit the speed of misinformation and disinformation.

b. *Restoring Trust in Media:* Promoting media literacy is critical in a democratic society. This cannot be done without restoring trust in the media. To do this we can target both public education and engagement at the local and international level. By strategically funding education programs and media institutions, we can provide access to critical education opportunities that can impact both the local and international understanding of journalism and media literacy. Doing so will strengthen civic engagement, media literacy and alter the perception of media. Additionally, it can change the motivations of media outlets to produce honest high-quality media. Restoring trust in media can provide a reputable mechanism to engage the public, increase soft power capabilities, and educate the citizenry in media literacy. Yet, this approach would still leave the harmful social media practices that allow for the weaponization of information largely unaddressed.

c. *Intergovernmental Cooperation:* International partners are a significant resource in meeting the challenges posed by information warfare campaigns propagated by foreign adversaries. Creating an intergovernmental institution to address this problem presents the opportunity to pool national resources and reaffirm the international rules-based order. Furthermore, such an institution can allow for states to share information and create public-private partnerships focused on countering the threats posed foreign and non-state actors. That being said, gridlock among member

states and the lack of enforcement power could present serious obstacles to countering malicious foreign and non-state actors.

5. Recommendation: Having weighed the strategic options, we recommend exploring a multi-pronged approach. Our recommendations include launching a government program aimed towards the reduction of disinformation, promotion of governmental collaboration with social media companies, and implementation of a national media literacy program in American schools. In light of this, government agencies must promote consumer protections regarding content algorithms, the deployment of fake accounts, and the profit-driven model that enables the spread of disinformation. As Russia and China continue to demonstrate their complex understanding of cultural pressure points in the United States, Americans must respond by understanding the existential threat this poses to democratic institutions. Implementing mandatory media literacy education in American schools is critical to protecting the integrity of national security, elections, mental health, and American institutions. Reducing disinformation in the public domain requires public-private cooperation, as social media and information technology companies continue to grow and approach states in terms of cultural, political, and economic power. Foreign adversaries flood social media platforms with disinformation that harms American citizens and interests, capitalizing on predatory algorithmic systems and national security. Congressional and public health professionals must explore regulatory means to prevent these adversaries from inflicting further harm on American institutions.

6. Implementation: In order to implement our strategies, we recommend the following courses of action:

a. *Social Media Literacy Program* – To address the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and the effective interference by foreign adversaries in this domain, the Department of Education should introduce a media literacy class in secondary education curriculums and fund a domestic exchange program for high school students interested in journalism and political science. Bolstering media literacy in students would mitigate the impact of information weaponization by adversaries, as well as provide the groundwork for wider campaigns. The Department of Education will establish a federally funded domestic exchange program that provide an opportunity for high school students to receive education from experts in journalism and political science. This program provides understanding of ethical practices in journalism that aim to introduce a new wave of media professionals. This effort will aim to advance trustworthy and credible journalism that reduces the effectiveness and ability of foreign adversaries to interfere in American media.

b. *Expansion of FTC Guidelines and Responsibilities* – To codify the different responsibilities of social media corporations, we suggest expanding the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to address these policies and advancements. By implementing domestic guidelines regarding regulating algorithms, increasing use of circuit breakers to examine content, and increasing consumer protections, we can ensure social media companies will contribute to the regulation of mis/disinformation. Similarly, by

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incorporating a focus on fact-checking incentives such as increasing pay for fact-checking positions within social media corporations, thus increasing the resources and staff available of such corporations while advancing US soft power. Such alternative policy proposals to the FTC's responsibilities would also contain higher provisions of individual responsibilities for workers; corporate identification markers of such employees would allow for a digital 'paper trail', leading to higher accountability for the spread of misinformation harmful to state interests and security.

7. The point of contact for this memorandum is CDT Adam Moreno at adam.moreno@westpoint.edu or 864-423-9924.

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