



Tariff Tirade

China-Aligned Network Poses
as Grassroots Voices in Effort
to Covertly Boost Online
Narratives Critical of US Tariffs
and Trade Policies

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05.2025

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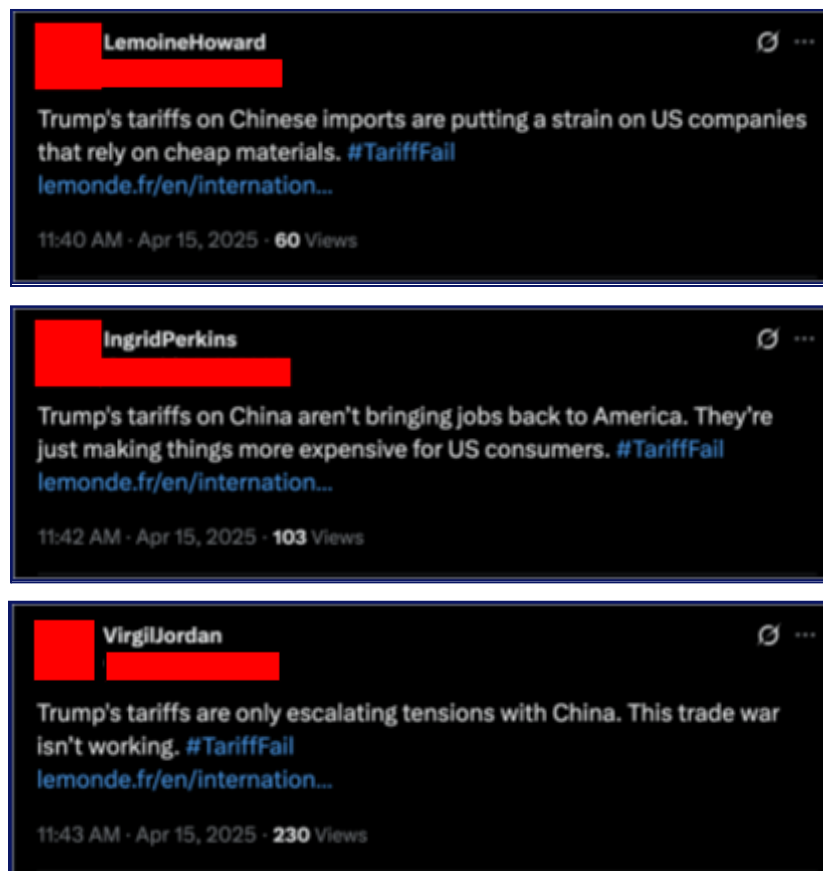
Key Findings

- We identified a network of over 1,000 X accounts engaged in coordinated and inauthentic behavior in an effort to influence the online information environment around the U.S.-China trade war and global tariffs. This included using fake personas purporting to be users in the U.S. and other countries, stealing content from authentic users, and the coordinated amplification of hashtags and media articles.
- The network advanced narratives critical of U.S. trade policy, casting President Donald Trump's tariffs as an act of economic self-injury that would hurt Americans and the global economy. Subsets of accounts in the network focused on the U.K., Canada, and Japan, framing these countries as resisting pressure and bullying from Washington.
- The network also seeded and amplified content that supports China's geopolitical agenda on non-trade issues. This included criticism of U.S. forces stationed in Japan and promotion of Chinese government tourism initiatives.
- Based on open-source indicators, we were not able to attribute this activity to a known influence operation (IO) or specific actor. However, based on an analysis of content disseminated by the operation and similarities between the identified behaviors and past IOs attributed to Chinese state actors, we assess that the network operator(s) were very likely aligned with the interests of China.
- Despite an apparent [de-escalation](#) in tensions between the U.S. and China, we assess that efforts by these and other actors to covertly influence online conversations about U.S. trade policy and tariffs will almost certainly continue.

Actors

We identified a suspected influence operation (IO) attempting to covertly influence the online information environment around the U.S.-China trade war and global tariffs. The activity comprised a network of at least 1,070 accounts on X that engaged in coordinated and inauthentic behaviors to spread online narratives critical of U.S. President Donald Trump's tariffs policy and supportive of countries framed as resisting pressure from Washington.

We could not attribute this activity to a known IO or specific actor based on open-source indicators. However, after analyzing content disseminated by the operation and identifying behavioral similarities between this network and past IOs attributed to Chinese state actors, we assess that the network operator(s) were very likely aligned with the interests of China. For instance, the operation used thinly developed inauthentic personas to consistently seed and amplify content that was supportive of Beijing's geopolitical agenda, a behavioral pattern reminiscent of [previously identified Chinese state IOs](#). This content included criticism of Trump's tariff policies, opposition to U.S. forces stationed in Japan, and promotion of Chinese government tourism initiatives, such as China's December 2024 [decision](#) to extend its visa-free transit policy.

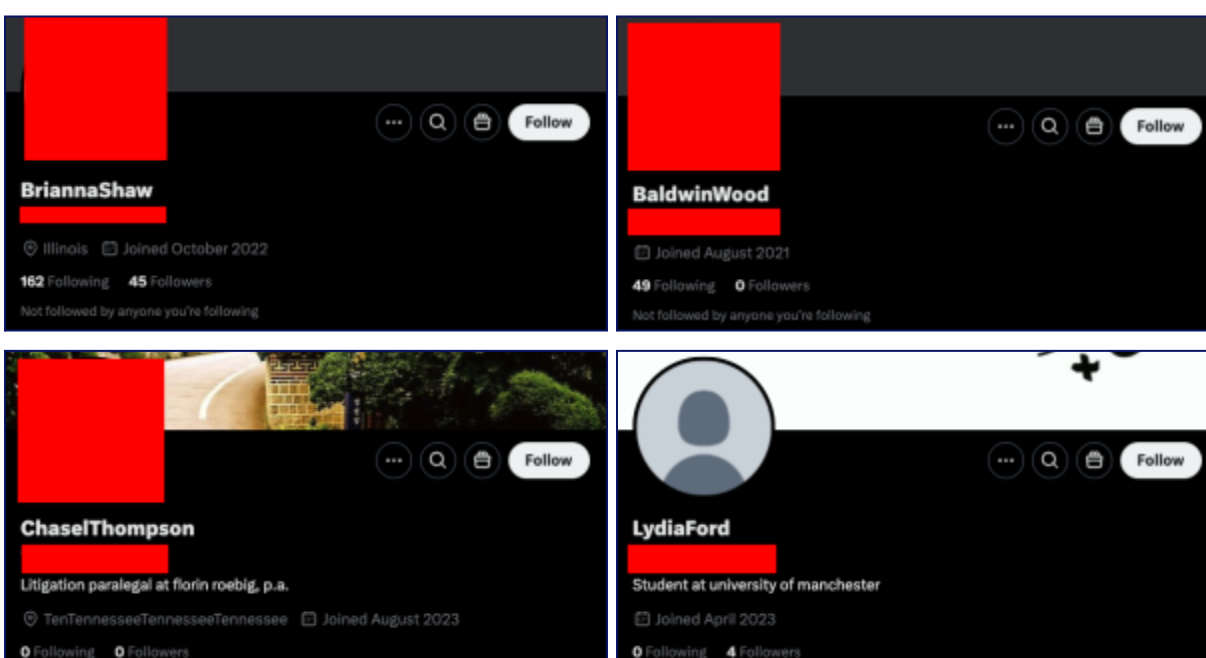


An example of three network accounts criticizing U.S. trade tariffs on China. Redactions added by Graphika.

Behaviors

All of the network accounts engaged in a consistent set of coordinated and inauthentic behaviors, supporting our assessment that this activity comprises a politically motivated IO. These behaviors included using fake personas purporting to be based in the U.S., stealing content from authentic users, and the coordinated sharing of a set of hashtags and media articles.

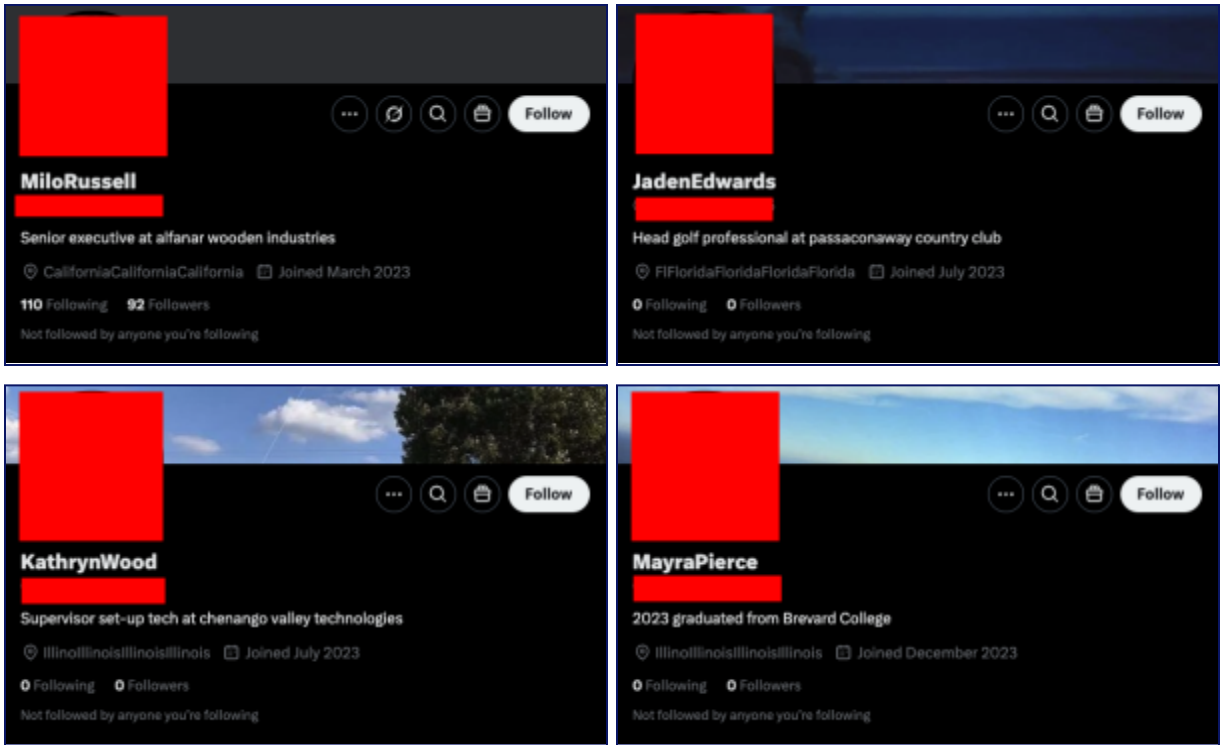
Nearly all of the accounts within the network had display names that used combinations of Western first names and surnames and featured distinct typographical similarities. The first names and surnames used in the accounts' display names are capitalized but concatenated (e.g., BriannaShaw, MiloRussell, JadenEdwards, and LydiaFord).



A sample of X accounts in the network that featured display names with no space between their name and surname. Redactions added by Graphika.

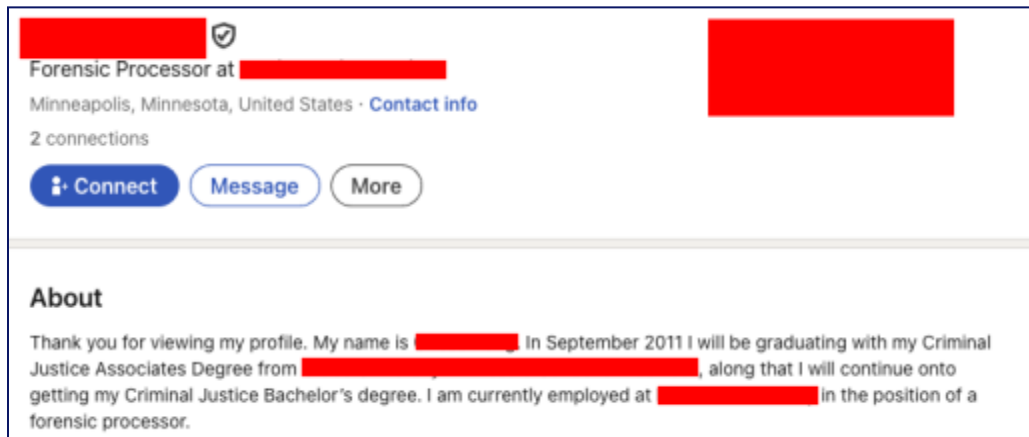
Similarly, most of the accounts in the network appear to have default usernames (or @-handles) assigned to new accounts. These handles typically combine the account's display name with a randomized numeric string. For example, an account with the display name GeorgeZip would use the handle @GeorgeZip35528260.

Some accounts in the network also provided self-reported locations that contained obvious errors. The listed locations were typically in the U.S. and repeated the same word multiple times (e.g., CaliforniaCaliforniaCalifornia).



A sample of X accounts in the network that featured incorrectly entered user-provided location fields in the account bio. Redactions added by Graphika.

We identified accounts in the network using bios and account profile information that was almost certainly copied from authentic users on other platforms, such as LinkedIn. On multiple occasions, different network accounts repurposed the same stolen bio information verbatim.

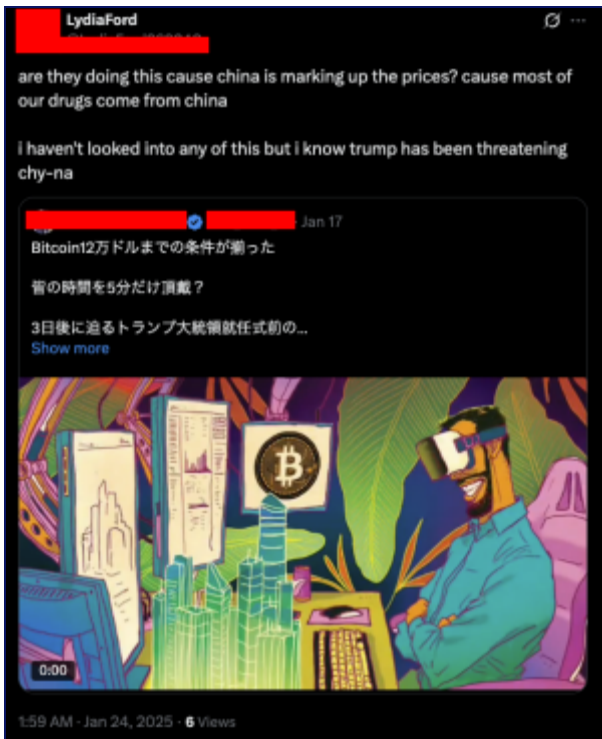


An X account in the network (top) used a bio description taken from a verified LinkedIn profile (bottom). The bio text was copied nearly verbatim with omitted capitalization. Redactions added by Graphika.

We repeatedly observed accounts in the network copying text from authentic X users to create their own posts. This often resulted in the network accounts posting nonsensical or irrelevant content in an implausibly wide variety of languages. For example, network accounts responded to a post about Bitcoin with a comment discussing drug manufacturing in China. In another instance, an account in this network responded to a post about a tulip fair in Japan with a post about the U.S. Constitution and federal law sourced from a U.S. user.



Posts on X by two network accounts (top left, bottom left) copied content from posts originally made by a British journalist (top right) and a self-described life coach in Hong Kong (bottom right). Redactions added by Graphika.



Posts on X by two network accounts (top left, top right) both used a post originally made by an authentic user (bottom) to respond to an unrelated post about Bitcoin. Redactions added by Graphika.

We identified multiple instances in which accounts in the network shared links to the same news articles within minutes of each other. The articles were all published by legitimate news outlets, including the BBC and the New York Times, and covered U.S. finances and trade policy. For example, during a 19-minute window on April 15, 2025, a set of accounts in the network made 87 posts that linked to a [Le Monde article](#) discussing Trump's tariffs and their implications for China.



These were among the 87 posts that shared links to the same Le Monde article within a span of 19 minutes on April 15, 2025. Redactions added by Graphika.

Similarly, we identified a set of eight hashtags that network accounts posted in a highly coordinated manner during April 2025.

- Of the network accounts we identified, 96.7% used one or more of the eight hashtags between April 15 and April 18.
- This activity peaked at 1,043 mentions on April 17 before sharply declining after April 18. The sudden increase and decrease in hashtag usage, particularly within a closed network of accounts, is highly suggestive of coordinated behavior.
- Since Jan. 1, 2025, the network has used hashtags that often contained generic terms (e.g., #travel) less consistently.

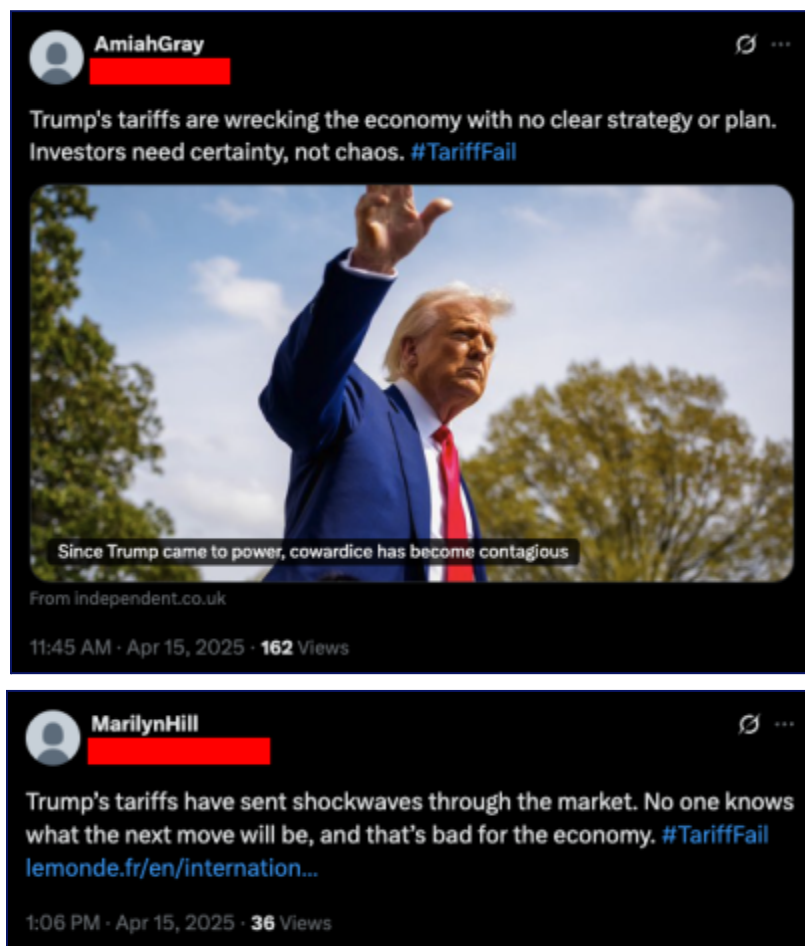
Content

We identified multiple recurring themes, mainly related to the implications of the U.S. tariffs, in the content shared by accounts in the network. The network amplified these narratives using a combination of original posts, hashtags, and news articles from legitimate media outlets.

The network consistently advanced narratives that criticized U.S. trade policy and Trump's decision to impose tariffs or championed the position of countries seen as resisting pressure from Washington. A smaller subset of accounts promoted narratives aligned with Beijing's position on other issues, such as opposition to U.S. forces stationed in Japan or promotion of a Chinese government tourism initiative.

tariff cuts costs
consumers
trump's tariffs
tariffs
tariff hikes diplomacy
economy decision

A word cloud showing the most commonly used key terms in posts by accounts in the network.



An example of posts from two network accounts criticizing "Trump's tariffs" as a threat to the U.S. economy. Redactions added by Graphika.

Special Relationship

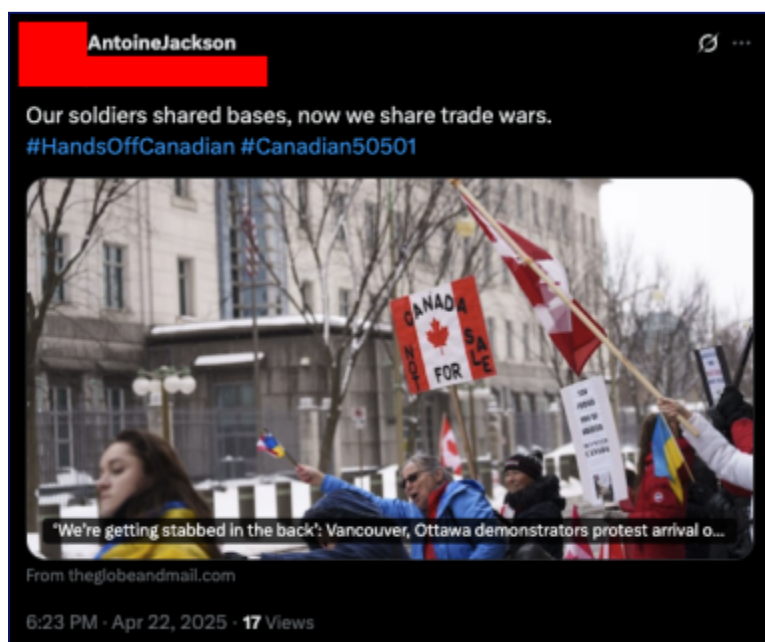
A subset of network accounts focused on the U.K. posted positive comments about the British response to U.S. tariffs. These accounts expressed support for the U.K.'s efforts to protect its economy by cutting trade tariffs and negotiating improved trading partnerships with other countries, which the operation said would benefit Britain and stand in "major contrast" to the U.S. These posts included links to media articles and British government announcements, accompanied by a string of hashtags: "#UKvsUSComparison #UKvsUSTrade #UKTariffRates."



Posts by network accounts about Britain's tariff cuts used the hashtags #UKvsUSComparison, #UKvsUSTrade, and #UKTariffRates. Redactions added by Graphika.

Hands Off Canada

A second subset of network accounts focused on Canada, posting support for Canadian resistance to U.S. actions on tariffs and other issues. The accounts criticized the U.S. tariffs as an act of betrayal and economic self-injury that would lead to increased prices and suffering for Americans and Canadians. Other posts used the hashtag #HandsOffCanadian to share [articles](#) about anti-tariff protests in Vancouver and Ottawa, as well as Canadian-American musician Neil Young [reportedly](#) attending a rally with a “Hands Off Canada” sign.



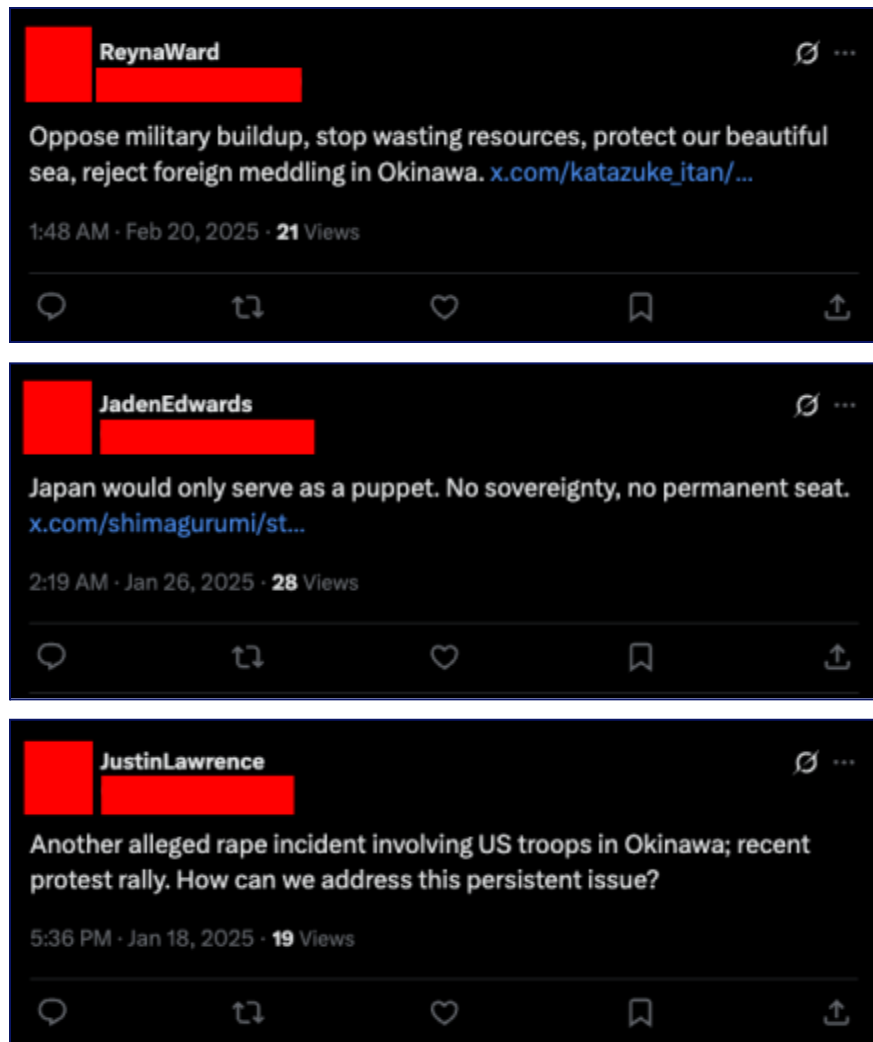
Network accounts used the hashtag #HandsOffCanadian while sharing a Globe and Mail article about Canadian protests against U.S. tariffs. Redactions added by Graphika.

#JapanSayNo

A portion of content posted by the network focused on Japan, including Tokyo's response to U.S. tariffs and criticism of U.S. military presence in Japan. The network promoted Japanese efforts to resist pressure from the U.S. tariffs, sharing comments by Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba and the hashtag #JapanSayNo. Other posts framed the presence of U.S. military forces in Japan as "foreign meddling," a waste of money, and evidence that Japan is a "vassal state" of the U.S. Some of these posts also highlighted allegations of sexual assault involving U.S. military personnel stationed in Okinawa.



Network accounts shared news articles about Japan's response to Trump's tariffs, followed by the hashtags #JapanSayNo and #SHIGERUIISHIBA. Redactions added by Graphika.

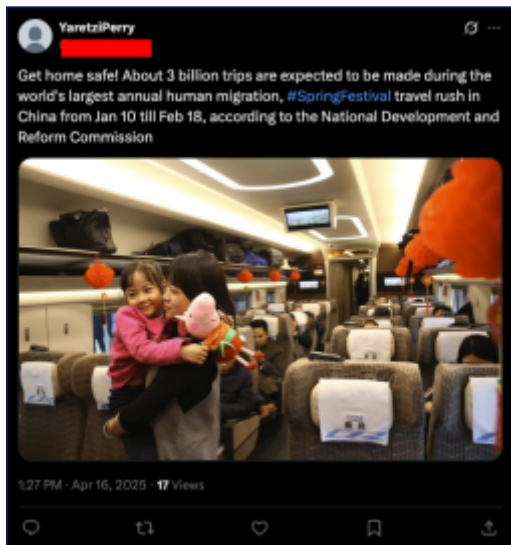


Posts by network accounts criticizing the U.S.'s military presence in Japan, casting Japan as a "puppet" of the U.S., and sharing allegations of sexual assault involving U.S. military personnel in Okinawa. Redactions added by Graphika.

144 Hours

We identified several narratives promoting Chinese tourism, particularly the 144-hour [transit visa](#) China previously had in place. While network accounts posted this content in April 2025, China extended its visa-free transit period to 10 days in December 2024. These posts urged users to use the transit visa instead of a visitor visa, which they characterized as more administratively intensive.

Some posts also referred to "144" in various contexts unrelated to China's transit visa or other narratives advanced by the network. While the reason for this is unclear, it is possible that the network operators inadvertently copied irrelevant content from authentic users after searching for posts that included "144" while trying to promote the Chinese transit visa.



Network accounts promoted China's previous 144-hour transit visa for international visitors. These posts were copied and pasted from other users on the platform. Redactions added by Graphika.

Estimative Language Legend

Assessments of Likelihood

Graphika uses the following vocabulary to indicate the likelihood of a hypothesis proving correct. If we are unable to assess likelihood due to limited or non-existent information, we may use terms such as “suggest.”

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Real Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain(ly)
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%

Confidence Levels: Indicators of Sourcing and Corroboration

Graphika uses confidence levels to indicate the quality of information, sources, and corroboration underpinning our assessments.

Low Confidence	Medium Confidence	High Confidence
Assessment based on information from a non-trusted source and/or information we have not been able to independently corroborate.	Assessment based on information that we are unable to sufficiently corroborate and/or information open to multiple interpretations.	Assessment based on information from multiple trusted sources that we are able to fully corroborate.



About Us

Graphika is the most trusted provider of actionable open-source intelligence to help organizations stay ahead of emerging online events and make decisions on how to navigate them. Led by prominent innovators and technologists in the field of online discourse analysis, Graphika supports global enterprises and public sector customers across trust & safety, cyber threat intelligence, and strategic communications spanning industries including intelligence, technology, media and entertainment, and global banking. Graphika continually integrates new and emerging technologies into our proprietary intelligence platform and analytic services, empowering our customers with high-precision intelligence and confidence to operate in a complex and continuously evolving information environment.

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