



CAN NAFO'S UKRAINE SUCCESS BE EXTENDED TO TAIWAN

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The North Atlantic Fella Organization ([NAFO](#)) is a decentralized online volunteer movement with no central command structure that focuses on combatting Russian propaganda and disinformation surrounding Russia's war in Ukraine. Most famous for its social media accounts featuring Shiba Inu avatars, NAFO volunteers use memes to mock, troll, and discredit Russian propaganda and its war effort. Considered a form of [information warfare](#), NAFO has harnessed the power of memes and social media platforms, to impact the information battlefield.

NAFO has laid out a potentially replicable blueprint for future conflicts. As digital information warfare, the NAFO experience—Ukraine's Ministry of Defense [singled it out](#) for combatting Russia in the information space—could be instrumental in a future fight for Taiwan, which finds itself on the frontlines of similar disinformation wars. NAFO and its potential successors represent a new age of digital activism, and will continue to have an influence, no matter how small, within informational warfare in the future.

In a notable early victory, NAFO's decentralized Twitter group successfully exposed and discredited Russia's top diplomat in Vienna, [Mikhail Ulyanov](#), for spreading disinformation. Ulyanov's response to a NAFO tweet with the infamous phrase "You pronounced this nonsense, not me" further backfired, transforming him into an [internet joke](#) and propelling NAFO's slogan to viral fame.

Russia has employed a variety of tactics to undermine support for Ukraine, including dissemination of false stories, manipulation of social media platforms, and the utilization of state-controlled media outlets such as RT to spread their [propaganda](#). As [research](#) conducted by MIT reveals that fake news on Twitter spreads six times faster than the truth, it must be assumed that the impact of this dissemination has been significant.

The NAFO alliance

NAFO emerged, Shiba Inu avatar and all, in May 2022 when an online artist created it. He later incorporated the idea into efforts to raise funds for the Georgian Legion fighting against the Russian invaders in Ukraine, and by September of last year the meme [reportedly](#) had "tens of thousands" of associates. Unlike Russia's reliance on paid [troll factories](#), NAFO relies on global volunteers who have the freedom to respond creatively. The low barrier to entry ensures anyone can join and its decentralized structure enables quick adaptation in the ever-evolving landscape of information warfare.

NAFO's success has been so significant that RT, the Russian state media outlet formerly known as Russia Today, attempted to undermine NAFO by [labeling](#) it a pro-Ukrainian "bot army." In July 2023, Russia's foreign ministry [spokeswoman](#) even took the time to make a post attacking NAFO, showing how much mental real estate NAFO occupies in the minds of Kremlin propagandists.

NAFO is making an impact on the battlefield as well. The NAFO fellas helped raise over \$250,000 to help fund [naval drones](#) through United24 in 2022. The NAFO Squad drone fundraiser has also gathered over \$420,000 to help purchase 240 [attack drones](#) to strike Russia. This fundraising helps the larger effort. Ukraine has been using aerial and sea drones to constantly [attack](#) Russian positions in Crimea and in the [Black Sea](#).

In an era when authoritarian regimes like China and Russia heavily invest in manipulating the narratives absorbed by their citizens and the global audience—especially during instances of social upheaval like

wars, protests, and revolutions—the lessons gleaned from NAFO’s successes in Ukraine’s information warfare provide valuable insights into how to navigate this battlefield of disinformation going forward.

The success of NAFO’s approach prompts us to question its viability in different geopolitical contexts. Specifically, could this model be instrumental in tackling Chinese disinformation campaigns that will continue to increasingly target Taiwan more aggressively in the future? It might be, or it might very well morph into something else to address the future need. But we expect more decentralized communities to engage in digital warfare in the future.

NAFO vs The Wolf Warriors?

Taiwan shares a commonality with Ukraine as a democracy constantly menaced by a neighboring authoritarian regime—in Taiwan’s case, the People’s Republic of China. Despite the scant geographical, cultural, or historical ties between Taiwan and Ukraine, the parallels in their experiences suggest that lessons from Ukraine’s resistance could be adapted to Taiwan’s situation today.

China’s disinformation strategies bear a striking resemblance to Russia’s, incorporating “[Wolf Warrior](#)” diplomacy, historical revisionism, cyberattacks, and a brigade of state-backed online trolls known as the “[50 Cent Army](#).” Unlike conventional trolls, these state actors promote a positive narrative rather than engaging in contentious discussions, strategically escalating their activities during prominent patriotic events or to eclipse unfavorable state news.

Backed by the Chinese [state](#), these internet commenters, [numbering](#) from 500,000 to 2 million, inundate the web with positive posts while avoiding debates. Their goal is to create an illusion of widespread support through deceptive writings.

Unlike typical trolls, they refrain from engaging in debates on topics like jailed dissidents or territorial disputes. Instead, they saturate the internet with unremarkable positive content. A [Harvard study](#) revealed that hardly any of the Chinese government’s “50 Cent Army” posts involve debate or argument. There have long been suspicions that the Chinese

government hires as many as 2 million individuals to anonymously insert deceptive writings, masquerading as the genuine opinions of ordinary people, into real social media discussions.

This air of positivity is not used across the board, however. When [Tsai Ing-wen](#) was elected Taiwan’s first female president in 2016, a campaign on the Chinese search engine forum, Baidu, aimed to flood her social media accounts with anti-Taiwan comments. Within just 12 hours, her Facebook page received 40,000 negative comments.

50 Cent actively participates in online discussions and shares a substantial number of supportive posts that express positive sentiments towards the PRC government and its policies. In the Indo-Pacific region, there may arise a need for a potential NAFO variant or a decentralized community to address the issue of China’s “50 Cent Army” trolls.

Whenever there arises a post lauding China’s effort to integrate Taiwan or a Chinese official disseminating misinformation on Western media, the community should counteract swiftly. The response could involve circulating satirical memes and humorously challenging such statements.

Just as NAFO’s modus operandi, future decentralized communities could harness their collective power to recognize, expose, and debunk such misinformation. The strength of this crowdsourcing approach lies in the sheer number of individuals capable of detecting and denouncing misinformation instantaneously. The group would also be able to serve as a sort of counter-intelligence, helping educate others to spot and report members of China’s info warriors across various platforms.

Moreover, it would be beneficial to conduct campaigns that directly counter disinformation and simultaneously educate Western audiences about the fallacious narratives promoted by the Chinese state. However, it’s crucial to comprehend that while such a movement can make a significant difference, it is unlikely to be a comprehensive solution against state-backed disinformation on its own. Instead, it should serve as one integral component of a broader, multi-

pronged strategy to combat Chinese [disinformation](#) effectively.

As China's preparations for a potential operation in the strait become more apparent, with China aiming to have the capability to take [Taiwan](#) by 2027 adds to the escalating concerns. Consequently, it is expected that Chinese online information warriors will intensify their efforts to aggressively target Taiwan, seeking to undermine its independence through social media and influence Western perceptions. This emerging battleground will be the primary focus of their online endeavors.

Presently, China is actively attempting to subdue [Taiwanese media](#) and tighten its grip on Taiwan's information channels. However, this trend is likely to extend beyond Taiwan's borders, with China seeking to exert control over Western media spaces concerning Taiwan. Online information warriors on Taiwan's behalf will need to be prepared to fight a more well-resourced and determined troll Chinese state machine. It will need to carry out efforts to consistently debunk propaganda and refute attempts to undermine Taiwan's sovereignty.

With its emergence as an important vector in the fight against disinformation, NAFO serves as a potential blueprint for future conflicts such as China's increasing aggression towards Taiwan. Perhaps NAFO was just the start in the evolutionary process of how decentralized communities in the democratic world will fight against authoritarian disinformation in the complexities of digital information warfare.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.