

Pro-PRC DRAGONBRIDGE Influence Campaign Targets Rare Earths Mining Companies in Attempt to Thwart Rivalry to PRC Market Dominance

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Overview

Since June 2019, Mandiant has reported to customers on an influence campaign known as DRAGONBRIDGE, comprising a network of thousands of inauthentic accounts across numerous social media platforms, websites, and forums that have promoted various narratives in support of the political interests of the People's Republic of China (PRC). We have since observed multiple shifts in DRAGONBRIDGE tactics, and in September 2021, we reported on an expansion of this campaign's activity.

Recently, we identified and investigated a subset of information operations activity we attribute to the DRAGONBRIDGE campaign across social media that targeted the Australian rare earths mining company, Lynas Rare Earths Ltd, with content criticizing its alleged environmental record and calling for protests of its planned construction of a rare earths processing facility in Texas. Subsequently in June, we observed additional DRAGONBRIDGE activity begin to target the Canadian rare earths mining company Appia Rare Earths & Uranium Corp and the American rare earths manufacturing company USA Rare Earth with negative messaging in response to potential or planned rare earths production activities involving those companies.

Mandiant has contacted Lynas, Appia, and USA Rare Earth about this activity, as well as social media platforms where this campaign promoted content. The campaign also promoted content criticizing the Biden administration's decision to invoke the Defense Production Act on March 31, 2022, to expedite the domestic production of critical minerals to end U.S. reliance on China for its supply.

We highlight this activity as particularly notable for two reasons:

It targeted an industry of strategic significance to the PRC, including specifically three commercial entities challenging the PRC's global market dominance in that industry.

- Rare earth metals are a critical part of consumer and defense products such as missile guidance systems and aircraft engines, and China has used its supply chain dominance as geopolitical leverage, including by threatening a rare earths embargo to the U.S. during the height of the trade war between the two countries in 2019.
- In 2021, the U.S. Department of Defense signed an agreement with Lynas, the world's largest rare earths mining and processing company outside China, to construct the Texas processing facility.
- In early June 2022, the Canadian rare earths miner Appia announced the discovery of a new rare earths bearing zone in Northern Saskatchewan, Canada. Similarly, the American rare earths supplier USA Rare Earth announced plans for a rare earths processing facility in Oklahoma in mid-June. Both statements prompted further activity from DRAGONBRIDGE in response.
- We note that further information operations activity in a similar vein may narrowly target other specific industries or companies that may be relevant to the PRC's strategic interests, beyond the promotion of geopolitical narratives in line with PRC political interests.

The campaign leveraged more nuanced tactics than what we typically see from pro-PRC information operations.

- The campaign used inauthentic social media and forum accounts, including those posing as residents in Texas to feign concern over environmental and health issues surrounding the plant, including via posts to a public social media group predisposed to be receptive to that content.
- These accounts also leveraged criticism of Biden's invocation of the Defense Production Act by real individuals, including U.S. politicians of both parties, to amplify campaign narratives.
- While the activity we detail here does not appear to have been particularly effective and received only limited engagement by seemingly real individuals, the campaign's microtargeting of specific audiences suggest the possibility of using similar means to manipulate public discourse surrounding other U.S. political issues to the PRC's advantage.

DRAGONBRIDGE Accounts, Including Those Posing as Local Residents, Protested the Planned Construction of Lynas Rare Earths Processing Facility in Texas

Mandiant identified what we assess with high confidence to be DRAGONBRIDGE accounts on multiple social media platforms and at least one forum, including those posing as concerned residents protesting Lynas' planned construction of a rare earths processing facility in Texas (Figure 1). The accounts claimed that by placing the Lynas plant in Texas, the Biden administration would expose the area to irreversible environmental damage and the local population to radioactive contamination and adverse health effects such as cancer risks, gene mutation, and deformities in newborns (Figure 2).

- DRAGONBRIDGE accounts, including those claiming to be from Texas, posted content critical of Lynas to the public Facebook group "STOP LYNAS! NO to Lynas Exporting and Creating Another Toxic Legacy."
- Notably, some of the Facebook posts by DRAGONBRIDGE accounts appear to have received limited engagement in the form of likes and comments by seemingly authentic accounts in the group.
- DRAGONBRIDGE accounts on Twitter likewise posted comments implying that they were locals and Americans.

Jackie Eberhart @JackieE79156511 · May 24
We must stand up and boycott Lynas. For the health of the local people and for the sake of our next generation, I hereby call on everyone to join hands to resist this source of pollution.



nytimes.com
Biden Invokes Cold War Statute to Boost Critical Mineral Supply
The action aims to enhance American production of crucial materials for electric vehicles, defense systems and other technologies.

🗨️ 🔄 ❤️ 📤

Jessica Smith @Jessica30842251 · Apr 26
#lynas Biden made Americans blindly pay for it for his own benefit.

🗨️ 2 🔄 ❤️ 2 📥 📤

Jessica Smith @Jessica30842251 · Apr 26
Our children need health.

🗨️ 🔄 ❤️ 📥 📤

Teresa Brown @TeresaB20843484 · May 9
I'm pretty sure we're just government guinea pigs

Joel Pollak @joelpollak · Mar 8
... and who provides the components and rare earth minerals for renewable energy technologies? "independence"
twitter.com/RNCRsearch/st...

Gladys Wright @GladysW45110078 · Apr 27
The waste residue from rare earth mining occupies a large amount of land, which will seriously affect our health and the surrounding ecological environment. Here, I call for the rare earth separation plant to stay away from Texas and the United States!

🗨️ 🔄 ❤️ 📤

Cox Teri ▶ STOP LYNAS! NO to Lynas Exporting and Creating Another Toxic Legacy

April 11 · 🌐

My friends and I have been resisting the construction of a rare earth processing plant in Texas by Lynas. If nothing is done, Lynas' waste discharge will directly or indirectly affect the health of local residents, and this pollution is irreversible.



👍 2

👍 Like 🗨️ Comment ➦ Share

Cox Teri ▶ STOP LYNAS! NO to Lynas Exporting and Creating Another Toxic Legacy

April 6 · 🌐

Lynas' natural radioactive waste is considered radioactive, and if it were released into our environment or body, we would be poisoned. Residents of Texas should not tolerate this or our children will be affected too.

👍 1

1 Comment 1 Share

👍 Like 🗨️ Comment ➦ Share

Cox Teri ▶ STOP LYNAS! NO to Lynas Exporting and Creating Another Toxic Legacy

March 29 · 🌐

LYNAS dumps toxic and radioactive waste, radioactive waste that affects lives, livelihoods, the environment and the health of future generations.

👍 3

👍 Like 🗨️ Comment ➦ Share

Figure 1: DRAGONBRIDGE accounts on Twitter and Facebook pose as concerned residents to protest Lynas' construction of a Texas facility and criticize the Biden administration's decision to expedite production of rare earth minerals

Jennifer Foster @Jennife17214162 · May 23
The hydrofluoric acid produced after the filtration of rare earth production is very corrosive, which directly led to the final closure of local schools due to breathing difficulties for teachers and students. Nitrogen oxide can also cause cramps, throat swelling, and even death!



🗨️ 🔄 ❤️ 📌

David @EX6J1CrYYkrqNP · Apr 11
Lynas does not have a specific waste treatment system, Please firmly resist Lynas's establishment of a heavy rare earth separation plant in Texas. #Lynas is a source of pollution



🗨️ 🔄 ❤️ 📌

Tara Garcia @TaraGar77336791 · Apr 26
The wastes discharged from the Lynas rare earth plant will harm the surrounding area, and it is very easy to induce gene mutation, which will mutate normal proto-oncogenes and tumor suppressor genes, thereby producing cancer cells.

Joel Pollak @joelpollak · Mar 8
... and who provides the components and rare earth minerals for renewable energy technologies? "independence"
twitter.com/RNCResearch/st...

🗨️ 🔄 ❤️ 📌

aleksandra @aleksan51230631 · 23h
Lynas' rare earth radioactive waste affects human health. The White House has allocated \$30.4 million to Lynas to build a factory in Texas. Is this to bring radioactive waste to people in this state?



🗨️ 🔄 ❤️ 📌

Figure 2: Accounts promote narratives highlighting pollution and health risks of Lynas' rare earths production

We observed accounts post primarily in English, with an additional lesser amount of content in Chinese. Additionally, we observed extremely limited messaging in Malay, and DRAGONBRIDGE accounts promoted photos of demonstrations against Lynas that took place in Malaysia sometime between 2012 and 2019, due to controversy surrounding the disposal of radioactive waste produced by its rare earths processing facility in the city of Kuantan. We also observed accounts call for Malaysians to boycott Lynas, a further indication of the campaign's interest in specifically targeting the rare earths mining company (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Accounts call for Malaysians to boycott Lynas

Activity Includes Quote-Tweeting of U.S. Politicians Negatively Commenting on Biden’s Invocation of Defense Production Act, Use of Related Hashtags

Accounts leveraged commentary by real individuals, such as U.S. politicians and commentators, to support their arguments against Lynas, its planned processing facility in Texas, and the Biden administration’s decision to expedite production of critical minerals. For example, accounts reposted criticism of Biden’s invocation of the Defense Production Act from individuals on both ends of the U.S. political spectrum. Others responded to posts regarding Lynas with additional negative messaging targeting the company.

Hashtags Used by DRAGONBRIDGE Accounts to Promote Messaging Surrounding Lynas

We identified the use of the following hashtags by DRAGONBRIDGE accounts:

- In English: #lynas, #rareearth, #minerals, #australia, #news, #rareearthminerals, #lynasgetout. We note that these hashtags are also used by authentic accounts.
- In Chinese: #lynas是污染源, #孩子需要健康的水源, #请停止和莱纳斯的合作, #lynas公司用人当白鼠 (Translation: #lynas is a source of pollution, #children need a healthy water source, #please stop cooperating with Lynas, #lynas corporation uses people as guinea pigs)

Accounts Begin Targeting of Additional Rare Earths Mining and Manufacturing Companies Appia, USA Rare Earth in June

In June, additional DRAGONBRIDGE social media accounts began targeting two additional rare earths mining and manufacturing companies, the Canadian rare earths mining company Appia Rare Earths & Uranium Corp and the American rare earths supplier USA Rare Earth. Accounts acted in response to announcements made by the respective companies regarding potential or planned operations, echoing previous criticisms centering around alleged environmental and labor concerns. Notably, DRAGONBRIDGE's targeting of additional rare earths mining companies underscores the campaign's ability to monitor developments and respond accordingly, as well as its investment in attempting to ensure the PRC's market dominance in the industry.

DRAGONBRIDGE accounts targeted Appia with negative messaging in response to the company's announcement on June 1 that it had discovered a new rare earths bearing zone in Saskatchewan, Canada. As with the planned Lynas facility in Texas, accounts professed concern for the environmental implications of Appia's actions and the health of its workers.

Following USA Rare Earth's announcement of a planned rare earths manufacturing facility in Oklahoma on June 9, DRAGONBRIDGE reiterated concerns surrounding the alleged impact of rare earths mining and processing, highlighting similar themes on the risks involved.

Farrah @Farrah72032130 · 7h
It's not exciting, our lakes will be destroyed.



ca.proactiveinvestors.com
Appia Rare Earth and Uranium announce exciting ...
Appia Rare Earth and Uranium President Frederick Kozak joined Steve Darling from Proactive to share...

Ashley Wilson @AshleyW96964328 · 7h
The protection of the lake, everyone's responsibility, if once mining, how to ensure the health of workers, firmly resist
ca.proactiveinvestors.com/companies/news...


Steve Darling
12:24 Wed 01 Jun 2022



Appia Rare Earth and Uranium President Frederick Kozak joined Steve Darling from Proactive to share news the company has announced assays results from its 2021 drilling program at the Alces Lake rare earth elements and gallium property in Northern Saskatchewan. Kozak telling Proactive those drill results have shown a massive new rare earth element bearing zone with shallow high-grade mineralization with a strike length of approximately 100 metres and consistently strong assay values. Kozak also told Proactive the company has begun drilling again at Alces Lake with plans to drill significantly deeper holes compared to the 100 holes drilled in 2021.

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Brown Emily
11h · 🌐
It's a terrible plan



CA.PROACTIVEINVESTORS.COM
Appia Rare Earth and Uranium announce exciting 2021 drill results from Alces Lake Project

Like Comment Share

Gonzales Bonnie
11h · 🌐
Now the idea of extracting rare earth elements from abandoned mines is terrifying



CA.PROACTIVEINVESTORS.COM
Appia Rare Earth and Uranium announce exciting 2021 drill results from Alces Lake Project

Like Comment Share

Figure 4: Newly identified DRAGONBRIDGE accounts criticizing the Canadian rare earths mining company Appia following its discovery of a new rare earths bearing zone in Saskatchewan, Canada

Newly Identified Accounts Posted Known DRAGONBRIDGE Content, Highlighting Attribution to Campaign

We observed multiple newly identified accounts promote the same content as previously identified DRAGONBRIDGE accounts both prior to and following their promotion of content pertaining to Lynas. This includes content critical of the Chinese businessman Guo Wengui (Miles Kwok), former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon, and Chinese virologist Dr. Yan Limeng, as well as narratives pertaining to the origin of COVID-19 (Figure 5). For example, accounts promoted a report we judged to be falsely attributed to the Milk Tea Alliance, a pro-democracy network consisting primarily of netizens in Asia, which put forth multiple theories on the origin of COVID-19. We have previously noted both criticism of these specific individuals and COVID-19 origin theories as common themes in the DRAGONBRIDGE campaign.

As with other DRAGONBRIDGE accounts we have previously identified, the newly identified accounts in this activity set have shown similar indicators of inauthenticity and coordination. For example, accounts used profile photos appropriated from various online sources, including stock photography, animals, and cartoons, suggesting that they sought to obfuscate their identities; most of the Twitter accounts were created in clusters between March and June 2022, suggesting possible batch creation of the accounts, a tactic we have previously observed with this campaign. Many of the usernames consisted of English-language names followed by seemingly random numeric strings. In addition to the accounts' posting of identical or similar rare earths-related content, we also observed some of the accounts post identical or similar apolitical content, such as inspirational quotes, wellness, travel, and sports content.



Figure 5: Sample tweets by accounts included narratives promoted by previously identified DRAGONBRIDGE activity, along with narratives critical of Lynas

Outlook

DRAGONBRIDGE's targeting of the rare earths industry broadly, and Lynas, Appia, and USA Rare Earth specifically, demonstrates an interest in industries of strategic importance to the PRC that we had not previously observed from the campaign. Given Chinese President Xi Jinping's continued emphasis on a broad, holistic understanding of PRC national security that encompasses areas including information and resource security, we may see other global competitors to PRC firms in other industries targeted by such information operations.

Additionally, the DRAGONBRIDGE campaign has in this activity set demonstrated the use of incrementally more sophisticated tactics, such as the microtargeting of audiences favorable to its messaging and the leveraging of criticism by real individuals to support its narratives and agenda. However, its poor execution remains a limiting factor in the campaign's ability to effectively garner significant engagement. We previously reported on the campaign's attempts to physically mobilize protesters in the U.S. in September 2021, and noted then that the campaign was unsuccessful in doing so. DRAGONBRIDGE's recent activity attempts to incite protests against the Lynas facility in Texas in particular shows a similar interest in influencing real-world activity to achieve its objectives, and a similar failure in such attempts.