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The Meaning of Sharp Power

How Authoritarian States Project Influence

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This essay draws on the forthcoming International Forum for Democratic Studies report *From "Soft Power" to "Sharp Power": Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World*.

The term "soft power" has become a political science catch-all for forms of influence that are not "hard" in the sense of military force. According to [Joseph Nye's original definition](#) [1], a country's hard power is based on coercion, largely a function of its [military](#) [1] or economic might. Soft power, in contrast, is based on attraction, arising from the positive appeal of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies—as well as from a vibrant, independent civil society.

As the Cold War era faded, analysts, journalists, and policymakers in democratic countries came to view [influence efforts from authoritarian countries](#) [2], such as China and Russia, through the familiar lens of soft power. But some of their techniques, although not hard in the openly coercive sense, are not really soft, either.

Contrary to some of the prevailing analysis, the influence wielded by Beijing and Moscow through initiatives in the spheres of media, culture, think tanks, and academia is not a "charm offensive," as the author Joshua Kurlantzick termed it in his book [Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World](#) [3]. Nor is it an effort to "share alternative ideas" or

“broaden the debate,” as the editorial leadership at the Russian [4] and Chinese [5] state information outlets suggest about themselves. It is not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centers on distraction and manipulation. These powerful and ambitious authoritarian regimes, which systematically suppress political pluralism and free expression to maintain power at home, are increasingly applying the same principles internationally.

Over the past decade, China has spent tens of billions of dollars to shape public opinion and perceptions around the world, employing a diverse toolkit that includes thousands of people-to-people exchanges, wide-ranging cultural activities, the development of media enterprises with global reach, and educational programs. The most notable of these is the ever-expanding network of Confucius Institutes, which are controversial because of the opacity with which they operate on Western university campuses; they “function as an arm of the Chinese state and are allowed to ignore academic freedom,” a 2014 statement from the American Association of University Professors [6] argued.

During roughly the same period, the Russian government [7] accelerated its own efforts in this sphere. In the mid-2000s, the Kremlin launched the global television network Russia Today (since rebranded as the more unassuming RT), built up its capacity to manipulate content online, increased its support for state-affiliated policy institutes, and more generally cultivated a web of influence activities—both on and offline—designed to alter international views to its advantage.

Although Russia and China [8] undertake some activities that can credibly fall into the category of normal public diplomacy—such as traditional music or dance performances—the nature of these countries’ political systems invariably and fundamentally color their efforts. In the case of China [9], for example, educational and cultural initiatives are accompanied by an authoritarian determination to monopolize ideas, suppress alternative narratives, and exploit partner institutions. The Confucius Institutes, for example, purport to be akin to Goethe Institutes, the German cultural associations, and Alliance Francais [10], the French version, but are closely coordinated by Hanban, the Chinese government’s Confucius Institute Headquarters. Their embeddedness on university campuses around the world—including in many democracies—has been found to put those institutions’ academic freedom at risk [11] through financial entanglement, pressure to self-censor, and a deliberate avoidance or one-sided framing of

topics sensitive to the Chinese authorities, such as Tibet, Taiwan, and Xinjiang. And such pressure could soon increase; the enshrinement of “Xi Jinping Thought,” that is, of President Xi Jinping’s worldview, in the country’s constitution leave little doubt about how extensively the regime hopes to tighten its grip on the public sphere.

The rulers of Russia, a less wealthy and powerful state, seem content to propagate the idea that their kleptocratic regime—whose paramount leader is rapidly approaching two decades in power—is a normal member of the international community and that its actions and statements are no less valid than those of democracies. As the Kremlinologist Lilia Shevtsova observed in an [article in the *Journal of Democracy*](#) ^[12], “for the Kremlin, ideas are instrumental. If an action is deemed necessary, ideas will be found to justify it. An atomized people is there to be confused and given the impression that everything is fluid and relative. Thus the system’s propaganda may claim, ‘Russian values do not differ dramatically from European values. We belong to the same civilization,’ only to posit a moment later that the West is Russia’s main enemy.”

At the outset, many observers breezily dismissed Russian and Chinese government efforts to build more modern and sophisticated tools of international influence. In 2010, one analyst in the [Columbia Journalism Review](#) ^[13] observed of Russia’s ambitions at the time that it is “unlikely there will be a need for the kind of shrill propaganda outlet that RT has been,” especially considering that “after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was no ideology to propagate.” And another, in the [Washington Post](#) ^[14] that same year, noted that there was a “dollop of Rube Goldberg” in the missteps of China’s efforts.

Indeed, authoritarians’ television and online initiatives, whose programming and editorial lines were at first stilted or disjointed, were seen as autocratic vanity projects or otherwise not worthy of serious consideration. But today’s reality is different—and the world’s democracies need to recognize that fact.

PROJECTING AUTHORITARIANISM

Skeptics’ dismissiveness of authoritarian influence activities led to a dangerous complacency, allowing the authoritarians, through trial and error, to refine their existing efforts and develop a much more powerful array of influence techniques. Critical to their success has been their exploitation of a glaring asymmetry: in an era of hyperglobalization, the regimes in Russia

and China have raised barriers to external political and cultural influence at home while simultaneously preying upon the openness of democratic systems abroad.

Moscow and Beijing's adjustments have been gradual but systematic. Russian officials, for their part, determined that they did not need to convince the world that their autocratic system was appealing in its own right. Instead, they realized that they could achieve their objectives by making democracy appear relatively less attractive. As former RT presenter Liz Wahl [15], who left the station in protest over its jaundiced coverage, has said, "After a while working for RT, you learn what stories management likes and how to tackle stories in a manner that the bosses find favorable. You come to learn that these stories must conform to a basic principle: make the U.S. and the West look bad. In doing so, you make Russia look better by comparison." Russian information manipulation efforts have thus constituted a relentless, multidimensional attack [16] on the prestige of democracies—the United States [17] and leading European Union countries especially—and on the ideas underlying democratic systems.

Meanwhile, as China has dramatically expanded its economic interests and business footprint around the globe, its government has focused its influence initiatives on masking its policies and suppressing, to the extent possible, any voices beyond China's borders that are critical of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) [18]. According to analysis by our institution and think tank partners, Beijing's techniques include both co-optation and manipulation, and they are targeted at the media, academia, and the policy community. The country seeks to permeate institutions in democratic states that might draw attention or raise obstacles to CCP interests, creating disincentives for any such resistance.

Although there are differences in the shape and tone of the Chinese and Russian approaches, both stem from an ideological model that privileges state power over individual liberty and is fundamentally hostile to free expression, open debate, and independent thought.

Observers should not understand Moscow's and Beijing's efforts as "soft power." They are more properly labeled "sharp power."

Authoritarian influence efforts are "sharp" in the sense that they pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environments in the targeted countries. In the ruthless new competition that is under way

between autocratic and democratic states, the repressive regimes' sharp power techniques should be seen as the tip of their dagger. These regimes are not necessarily seeking to "win hearts and minds," the common frame of reference for soft power efforts, but they are surely seeking to manipulate their target audiences by distorting the information that reaches them.

Sharp power likewise enables the authoritarians to cut into the fabric of a society, stoking and amplifying existing divisions. Russia has been especially adept at exploiting rifts within the democracies [19], for example promoting narratives in Central and Eastern European countries that aim to undermine support for the EU and NATO. And unlike the blunt impact of hard power, sharp power entails a degree of stealth. Taking advantage of the open political and information environment of democracies, the authoritarians' sharp power efforts are typically difficult to detect, meaning that they benefit from a lag time before the targeted democracies realize there is a problem.

Above all, the term "sharp power" captures the malign and aggressive nature of the authoritarian projects, which bear little resemblance to the benign attraction of soft power. Through sharp power, the generally unattractive values of authoritarian systems—which encourage a monopoly on power, top-down control, censorship, and coerced or purchased loyalty—are projected outward, and those affected are not so much audiences as victims.

NO CONTEST?

Decision-makers in Beijing and Moscow have the political will to build up and implement their influence efforts. By comparison, the United States and other leading democracies seem to have withdrawn from competition in the sphere of ideas. The democracies have been slow to shake off the long-standing assumption—in vogue from the end of the Cold War until the mid-2000s—that unbridled integration with repressive regimes would inevitably change them for the better, without any harmful effects on the democracies themselves. But as globalization accelerated and integration deepened over the past decade, the authoritarians survived, and their ability to penetrate the political and media space of democracies has become progressively stronger [20]. The authoritarian initiatives themselves are truly global in scope, turning up in democratic countries on every continent.

The democracies' complacency concerning the evolution of malign, sharp power has been informed by their reliance on the soft power paradigm. The conceptual vocabulary that has been used since the Cold War's end no longer seems adequate to the contemporary situation. Until democratic states come to terms with the underlying nature of the authoritarians' influence, they will be hamstrung in their ability to marshal effective responses to this threat.

A clearer picture of these regimes' intent can be gleaned from their own domestic political and media landscapes. Beijing and Moscow [21] have methodically suppressed genuine dissent, smeared or silenced political opponents, inundated their citizens with propagandistic content, and deftly co-opted independent voices and institutions—all while seeking to maintain a deceptive appearance of pluralism, openness, and modernity. Indeed, the dazzling variety of content available to consumers helps disguise the reality that the paramount authorities in these countries brook no dissent. In China's case, a sophisticated system of online manipulation—which includes a vast, multilayered censorship system and “online content monitors” in government departments and private companies who number in the millions [22]—is designed to suppress and neutralize political speech and collective action, even while encouraging many ordinary people to feel as though they can express themselves on a range of issues they care about.

It is with a similar approach that the authoritarian trendsetters have plunged into the open societies of the democratic world. For example, just as Beijing has compelled its domestic Internet companies and news outlets to police their own content, it hopes to school its international interlocutors on the boundaries of permissible expression.

Those who interpret these efforts as a way for Moscow and Beijing to boost their countries' soft power are missing the mark and risk perpetuating a false sense of security. After all, if the aim of the authoritarians' efforts is to improve their international image, then it stands to reason that their elaborate initiatives must not be working [23] because Russia [24] and China [25] do not in fact enjoy an improved image in the democracies. And even if they were, there would be no obvious or direct harm to democratic states.

Unfortunately, authoritarian regimes view the use of such power in an entirely different way, one that cannot be divorced from the political values by which they govern at home. As the essays in a forthcoming report by the National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum for Democratic

Studies point out, the authoritarians are not engaged in a form of public diplomacy as democracies would understand it. Instead, they appear to be pursuing more malign objectives, often associated with new forms of outwardly directed censorship and information manipulation.

The serious challenge posed by authoritarian sharp power requires a multidimensional response that includes unmasking Chinese and Russian influence efforts that rely in large part on camouflage—disguising state-directed projects as the work of commercial media or grassroots associations, for example, or using local actors as conduits for foreign propaganda and tools of foreign manipulation. It will also require that the democracies, on the one hand, inoculate themselves against malign authoritarian influence that corrodes democratic institutions and standards and, on the other, take a far more assertive posture on behalf of their own principles.

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