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Sharp Power: How Foreign Election Interference is Changing the Global Balance of Power

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Sharp Power

Information Warfare and the Changing
Global Balance of Power



Honors Thesis
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Abstract

The term sharp power was coined in 2017 in order to describe what appeared to be a new form of covert influence by Russia, China, and other authoritarian states into the political systems of democracies. The increasing effectiveness of sharp power, due to advances in technology and the growing power of China and Russia, emphasizes a change to a more multipolar global balance of power. While the term sharp power ultimately does not describe new tactics, indeed information warfare already serves this purpose, it can help illuminate what global leadership will look like from authoritarian states in the near future. Constructivism is a useful lens to grasp how authoritarian states are using sharp power to change the narrative about what a good form of governance is. This thesis uses a case study research method, which examines Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections and Chinese influence in Australia's politics. Russia spreads disinformation in order to sow disunity in its rivals and further its foreign policy goals. China uses propaganda in order to paint a better narrative about its place in the international system. To further research in this area future projects should answer whether sharp power deserves its own category of power, why democracies are so vulnerable to it now than in the past, and what policies can be implemented to combat its influence.

I. Introduction

Over the past two decades the world has been witness to a rising China and a resurgent Russia. Both states seek to grow their global sphere of influence whether through economic expansion, military maneuvering, or through the foraging of new diplomatic relationships. This thesis focuses on a relatively new term called “sharp power” that has been used to describe covert interference by Russia, China, and other authoritarian states into the political workings of democracies around the globe. Developing a clearer picture of how China and Russia are using sharp power to exert influence abroad gives a clearer image of what global leadership from these countries will look like in the future. While this paper makes no attempt to lay out policy suggestions for established democracies falling victim to sharp power, it does assert that sharp power will continue to be an important tool for years to come. The argument put forth is that both the increase in power of China and Russia, paired with the development of new technologies makes sharp power more important and more consequential for international relations than it was in the past, and that the increase in sharp power’s effectiveness illustrates a change to a more multipolar global balance of power.

This thesis will first define the different forms of power, such as soft and hard power, and then explain how sharp power fits into international relations. Reviewing the very limited research available on this subject, the project will contribute to the literature by showing how states have been using sharp power to influence each other for a very long time. Next, the concept will be viewed through the theoretical lens of constructivism, which helps us to comprehend the impact that sharp power operations are having on the norms that guide the international system. Finally, the findings will consist of two case studies, Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, and Chinese interference in the Australian political system.

II. Literature Review

What is Sharp Power?

The concept of Sharp Power is quite new and appears to be first used by Jessica Ludwig and Christopher Walker in a 2017 *Foreign Affairs* article in which they explore the need to create a separate term to describe the power authoritarian states, mainly Russia and China, are using “that pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries” in order to expand their global influence (2017). The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) sees sharp power as a major threat to democratic systems and the NGO claims that “democracies [have] come to see authoritarian influence efforts through the familiar lens of “soft power,” but that concerted efforts to influence policy making in democracies by actors such as China and Russia don’t fall under the scope of soft or hard power (2017, 6).

In order to define sharp power, it is important to frame an understanding of what power is in international relations. The most concise and useful definition comes from Joseph Nye in which he simply states that “power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want” (2014, 4). In international relations we can measure a state’s power by its ability to get other states to do what it wants them to when they would have previously done something differently. For example, the US was able to easily push Iraq’s forces out of Kuwait in the 1990 Gulf War, achieving what it wanted with relative ease because of superior military power compared to Iraq. In the simplest sense, if you cannot stop another state from infringing on your sovereignty, then you are the less powerful state. This is especially useful when examining the growing global power of China and Russia because Russia was able to interfere in the 2016 US presidential election, which signals a relative power increase for them over the US.

When Nye coined the term soft power in the late 80s, he essentially split the understanding of how international actors use power into two main categories: power wielded through coercion or payment and power wielded through attraction (Ikenberry 2004, 137; Nye 2004, 2). Hard power has framed the traditional realist understanding of how states interact with each other because it is the form of power expressed with military and economic might. Hard power is based on threats or payments making its sources a country's relative military or economic standing (Nye 2016, 274). Because the US has such a large role in the global economy it is able to cause immense pain to a country's wellbeing by shutting them out through sanctions. A case like this can be clearly illustrated in the contraction of Iran's GDP by an estimated 4.8% in 2018 due to Trump administration's imposition of sanctions in May of 2018 over the disputed Iran Nuclear Deal (How Renewed US Sanctions Have Hit Iran Hard 2019). The US is thus using coercion through the inducement of payments that Iran will get if they agree to a 'better' Iran Deal. Military coercion is probably the easiest source of hard power to spot. When Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 it used the hard power capabilities of its military to force Ukraine to abandon the territory.

Nye actually argues that sharp power is a type of hard power because it uses coercion to get a state to do what another state wants through "the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes" (Nye 2018). What is distinct about sharp power from hard power is the covertness of the former without the use of the military. With hard power one state is using very obvious methods to achieve an objective, such as threatening to invade another country with military force. But the actions of a country using sharp power are not intended to be obvious, the state perpetrating these actions want to be able to deny, for example, that they funded a state-run program to spread fake news through social media during an election cycle. This is because, for a

country like China who is trying to improve their world image, tampering in a foreign government's elections makes world leaders trust that country less. Also, when a government is able to deny allegations of election interference into another government then it is difficult for the latter to be able to respond with effective force. For example, it was easy for George Bush to muster a response to terrorist attacks in the early 2000s, but the very nature of election interference makes it a much more political and easily pushed aside issue.

If sharp power differs from hard power in its covertness, then sharp power differs from soft power because of its coercive nature. The term soft power was first coined by Joseph Nye in the 90s and it is described as "the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion" (Ikenberry 2004, 137). When a country exercises soft power, it is using persuasion as opposed to payments or coercion, which defines the fundamental difference between soft power from hard power (Nye 2014, 2). Furthermore, while the sources of hard power rely on military and economic strength soft power rests on the resources of culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye 2011, 84). The political values of the US, such as democracy and individual liberty, give the nation a strong attractive quality that enhances its global sway. The economic success of the American media industry, based on the number of international consumers of American television and music, increases US soft power by making it more culturally attractive.

It is often difficult to discern the difference between soft and sharp power because their implementations can look very similar. A good example is the reproduction of foreign news outlets into different countries. Both the American company The New York Times and the Russian company RT produce news for international consumption, but there are key differences that make one a tool of soft power and the other a tool of sharp power. RT is a tool of sharp

power because it is directly controlled by the Kremlin and its specific aim is to undermine trust in the US democratic system in an effort to create political discord and undercut American criticism of the Russian system (ODNI 2017, 7). While governments across the world may argue that The New York Times oversteps into their domestic policy making, the company is independent of government control and does not specifically seek to create political disunion in other countries' affairs. This is what defines it as a tool of soft power, its global influence without governmental control or coercive intent.

One of the major issues with the literature is determining which state produced actions actually constitute sharp power. This is probably because the term was so recently created, and the fact is that many people describing foreign interference campaigns don't use the term in their descriptions of these actions. For example, when the National Endowment for Democracy used sharp power to describe the concerted efforts by Russia and China to interfere in democracies in order to increase their influence abroad, many of the contributing articles of the report instead used the term 'soft power' as a descriptor. As stated by NED, sharp power was an idea that came out of the findings of these separate reports, but it is still hard to know whether, for example, China is exerting sharp power in its diplomatic and economic dealings with Slovakia and other Eastern European countries (NED 2017). This thesis seeks to add some clarity to the term sharp power to try and fill in this hole of understanding, but it will take time before the term is addressed by the international relations community at large.

Walker has already attempted to focus the meaning of this term, describing three ways in which authoritarian regimes are using sharp power. They are (1) attempting to create a separate narrative that the idea of democracy isn't actually the best form of government. (2) They are using the openness of democracies to try and sway them through social media and other public

forums. A stark example of this is with Russia's use of its media company RT to spread fake news stories and disinformation (ODNI 2017, 8). And (3) they are perforating democratic governments by using “hybrid state capitalist systems” to restrict the openness in the business world through the influence of multinational businesses (Walker 2018, 11). We will examine this last one more carefully in China’s interference campaign in the Australian political system.

How Is Sharp Power Different from Foreign Interference During the 20th Century?

While the term sharp power might be new, the idea of interfering into another’s governmental operations is not, indeed one can find examples of sharp power throughout history. A major criticism of the use of the term sharp power is that the US and other Western powers have been using information warfare techniques to disrupt foreign governmental operations for hundreds of years. During the Cold-War the US launched covert operations that could be described as sharp power in order to stymie the growth of Communism and Soviet global power. One an example of the US using sharp power is during the Nicaraguan Civil War in the 1980s. In order to help the Contras against the Sandinista government the CIA provided a manual for psychological operations that included “propagandistic” use of violence against mainly governmental officials (Theohary 2018, 8). Another example of US covert action is interfering in the 1948 Italian elections in order to stop Marxist leaning political leaders from seizing power. A newly formed branch of the US government called the Office of Policy Coordination organized millions of the US Italian diaspora to write to their relatives and friend and urge them not to vote for the leftist party (Baines and Jones 2018, 15).

It seems then that the only thing new about sharp power is that it is being directed against the US and its closest allies by predominantly authoritarian powers like Russia and China, in

very pervasive ways. Perhaps it is important to characterize election interference as sharp power because the term helps to distinguish interference campaigns from soft power, which wrongly implies that efforts to create disorder in rival countries' governance are a form of "public diplomacy" (Walker, Ludwig 2018, 13). But, as states have been directing covert campaigns against each other for centuries, in order to direct the decisions of their rivals, there are already terms in place to describe these actions. The first and most important of these terms is information warfare, which is described "as the use and management of information to pursue a competitive advantage" (Theohary 2018, 1). The types of information that a state disseminates when carrying out an information warfare campaign are important to understand its foreign policy goals. First is disinformation, which is "intentionally false information" that is spread to sow confusion. It can be used if a country wants to hurt the capacity of a rival state. Another one is propaganda, which is information disseminated to further a positive narrative for an individual state that changes people's perceptions in favor of it. Information warfare campaigns attempt to manipulate the information environment of a state, this is defined as "the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, disseminate, or act on information" (2018, 5).

The examples of sharp power described above can also be applied to information warfare. When the US used the Italian diaspora to write millions of letters to shape the outcome of the 1948 election it was using information as a weapon to secure political aims in another country's election. Sharp power also seems to entail a number of other activities that states may use in the international arena such as active measures, "state-sponsored influence operations targeting citizenry," and public diplomacy that "intends to inform or influence public opinion in other countries" (Theohary 2018, 5). Obviously public diplomacy and active measure are not all

coercive in their uses, but they can both be used to effectively achieve foreign policy objectives in another state.

If information warfare entails what sharp power is, then why is it necessary to continue to use the term? The answer is that it may actually not be a useful term at all. Information warfare is a lot more self-explanatory than sharp power. If someone is trying to convey the same idea to political leaders it would probably be easier to just say information warfare than to explain what sharp power is. But this is not a decision that this paper attempts to make because it is only trying to focus on how sharp power is reflecting the changing global balance of power. For now, sharp power will be used to describe information warfare as its primary source of power. This means that while hard power draws on coercion or payments and soft power draws on persuasion, sharp power draws on the covert and coercive use of information. This is important to understand as we explore the possibility that states are drawing on this third source of power that is becoming more accessible due to the changing nature of technology in the information environment.

III. The Theory

Constructivist Perspective

When trying to understand how states like Russia and China might be using sharp power to increase their international power, one could use the international relations theory of constructivism as a helpful lens. The concept of constructivism is based on the idea that international actors are constantly reshaping the rules of the system “through their actions and interactions” (Theys 2018). Constructivists acknowledging the importance that a socially constructed world puts on different resources and actions. The core idea of constructivism is that social norms matter in the decisions of international actors. For example, it is socially abhorrent

to commit genocide against a group of people in one's country and doing so will most likely set off a wave of international outcry that can range from strongly worded speeches by the heads of states and IGOs like the UN, to the imposition of economic sanctions and even humanitarian intervention with the use of military force. While genocide is a very extreme example to use it is important to note that part of the reason the World views genocide this way is because of historical events that shaped this normative approach. If there hadn't been all the horrible acts against humanity that came out of WWII, like the Holocaust or the Rape of Nanking, would the international community have formed as strong of feelings against genocide?

The international system that loosely holds the world together is comprised of liberal institutions that value individual freedoms and the idea of democracy. Article 1 of the UN Charter states the importance of protecting human rights and the sovereignty and self-determination of states (Chapter I 1945). Since WWII these have become the overarching norms that dictate how governments should conduct themselves both internationally and domestically. While it is true that the UN Charter is by no way binding its statements do give other countries much more legitimacy than others. This is not conducive for world powers that have an authoritarian model of governance such as Russia and China. For them the rules of the game do not support the choices that they see as furthering their nation's self-interest. Recently China has sought to "unify" its country even more by limiting the cultural practices of its minority Muslim Uyghur population. This has included the construction of detention camps to "re-educate" the population away from practicing their religion, the central government in Beijing has argued this is for fighting terrorism (Proffitt 2020). This is just one example of an act that has been condemned by the UN and other international actors.

Russia has also repeatedly acted in a way that doesn't satisfy the UN Charter. A recent example is the country's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine in 2014. Russia's justification was that it was actually helping to further self-determination because it was reincorporating land that had a high population of Russian nationals living in it. The military act was condemned by the UN General assembly in a vote of 100-11 in which the body defended "Ukraine's territorial integrity" (Pifer 2019).

Both Russia and China have faced much scrutiny from the current international order, and it would be in their best interests if the norms guiding this order were shifted to have a more favorable attitude toward authoritarian governance and actions. A constructivist perspective is that China and Russia are increasing their sharp power capacities in order to change the global narrative. As will be discussed in the 'findings' section of this thesis China and Russia are using different methods in their information warfare campaigns. Russia is primarily conducting disinformation operations, which is the manufacturing and planting of intentionally false information, like a fake news story spread over Facebook (Theohary 2018, 5). A constructivist would say that the Russian government is trying to appear as more normatively acceptable actor by "making democracy appear relatively less attractive" through disinformation campaigns (Walker and Ludwig 2017).

Instead of using disinformation China is focused on spreading propaganda that makes it look more internationally attractive by "masking its policies" that wouldn't be received favorably and trying to suppress any critical voices "beyond China's borders" (Walker and Ludwig 2017). These information suppression tactics will be discussed more in depth in the 'findings' section that focuses on Chinese and Australian relations.

An uptick in Chinese and Russian sharp power activities also comes during a period that has been characterized by a decreasing level of democracy and individual freedoms worldwide. Freedom House recently showed that global democracy has suffered 14 years of decline while 25 of the world's 41 established democracies faced a decrease in functioning of government, freedom of expression and belief, and rule of law (Repucci 2020). What's more is that worldwide 52% of people are dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy (Connaughton, Kent, and Schumacher 2020). What these findings signal is that this moment could be the perfect time for Russia and China to use their sharp power capacities in order to push people farther away from thinking that democracy is an important and good form of government. If these two countries seek to establish themselves as more permanent leaders in the international arena, then changing the norms about what is an acceptable form of government is vital for them.

IV. The Research Design

Conducting conclusive research on sharp power has not been an easy task. To explain the difficulties of studying this topic in the field of political science research I draw on a recent article by Melissa K. Griffith, which highlights a few distinct problems when studying cyber conflicts (2018). Firstly, studying sharp power effectively requires a working understanding of technologies that are not so easily conceived from a political science-based education. While I may be able to point to the fact that the Russian's hacked into DNC servers to conduct a political smear campaign, I don't actually know the technical details in how they did this. It's hard to grasp the severity of this action without knowing the minutia of what the action actually entails.

The second reason Griffith mentions is the limited amount of information related to cyber conflicts (2018). This is because most of the time actors involved are trying to conceal what they

are doing. Intelligence reports and investigations within governments may not become available to researchers. I faced this problem when trying to understand the extent of Russian meddling in the 2016 US presidential election; in the key document of the Mueller report countless lines are blacked out. In the case involving China, the country is constantly trying to conceal information that could be damaging to its global opinion.

This thesis used a case study method for its research design. Two cases were used to illustrate the argument about sharp power and the changing global balance of power. The first was Russian meddling in the 2016 US Presidential Election. This case pulled most of its substance from highly detailed governmental reports that often had information missing from them. The second case covered Chinese foreign interference in Australia's politics, a difficult case to study as Australia is not as prominent an international actor as the United States and the subject matter under inspection was limited.

V. The Findings: Case Studies

Russian Interference in US Elections

The goal of this section is to try to understand the shifting global balance of power in regard to Russia and the United States by focusing on the case of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election. The information warfare Russia used against the US was unprecedented in its ability reach to millions of Americans and was successful in shaking the public perception of trust in the US electoral system. The disinformation campaign also augmented the political polarization that was already creating divisions within the workings of the democracy. Russian meddling into the US's information environment followed similar tactics of the Soviet era but was amplified by new technology that is at contemporary Russia's disposal.

The boldness of these sharp power activities shows a resurgent Russia unafraid to manipulate the political conversation of its main adversary for foreign policy gains. To understand the development of Russia's sharp power capacities since the fall of the USSR it is important to give historical context from within the Cold War time period.

During the Cold War the US and the USSR were in a constant struggle to outmaneuver the other and gain more international power. Obvious examples of power struggles include proxy wars such as the Vietnam War. What is often left out of the story is how the information environment was weaponized, especially by the Soviet Union. Using the KGB, Soviet leaders pursued tactics known as active measures, which were "covert offensive instruments" designed to "disrupt relations between other nations" as well as discrediting opponents and influencing the "policies of foreign governments in favor of Soviet plans and policies" (Walton 2019, 108). Active measures operations were put under a department inside the KGB known as Service A, which directed all overseas KGB agents to partake in active measures as it was key to their Cold War strategy.

With the creation of Service A at the beginning of the Cold War, the USSR made it clear that a primary focus of its foreign policy would be to build up the capacity of their sharp power through active measures and information warfare. The way in which the KGB used their sharp power capacities was to spread disinformation that targeted rival countries weak points through the use of media outlets, which included radio broadcasts, documentary films, books, and foreign news articles. It is estimated that the production of this foreign propaganda material cost the USSR \$3-4 billion annually (Walton 2019, 111).

While the majority of this case study will focus on relations between the US and Russia/USSR it important to note that the Soviet Union used information warfare in any country

they sought to influence in their favor. Russia has resumed conducting these operations in other parts of the world as well, such as in Ukraine. An example of a USSR disinformation campaign is when the intelligence agency of the satellite state Czechoslovakia sought to stain the image of West Germany by falsely connecting government officials to the Nazis of WWII. These efforts culminated successfully in 1964 when it was reported that a trunkful of Nazi documents had been found at the bottom of a lake in West Germany (Kux 1985, 20). By foraging this false narrative of West Germany the Soviets were able to make the nation look worse and, therefore, bolster the legitimacy of their governance of the East German satellite state.

Proponents of the idea of sharp power claim that authoritarian regimes use the openness of democratic systems to their advantage, by channeling disinformation through open forums they can benefit from the “asymmetry” between democratic and authoritarian political conversations (Walker and Ludwig 2017, 9). What these researches fail to say is that this was a common practice used by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. An example of this is the creation of KGB backed US and international front groups that worked to sow division and mistrust within the political system. These organizations looked and acted as though they were created by US citizens in order to champion various ideologies and they were even able to organize events such as an anti-Reagan rally in San Francisco (Walton 2019, 110). As we will see later on, Russia orchestrated similar events during the 2016 US Presidential Election.

As mentioned earlier in this section, the Soviet Union sought to inflame social issues within rival countries in order to undermine its political unity. The USSR created a series of fake news stories and conspiracy theories during the Cold War in order to exploit racial tensions in US society. The Soviet Union also wanted to create a negative image of the US in the unaligned countries, which belonged neither to a communist government or a Western alliance, that both

rivals were vying for influence over. Building on longstanding distrust of American foreign policy throughout Africa the Soviets were able to augment suspicions, and therefore hinder cooperation between the US and countries like Zimbabwe, by the spread of fake news stories (Kux 1985, 26). The most notorious example of disinformation souring relations between the US and developing nations was the creation of the AIDS conspiracy, which claimed that the virus was made in a government laboratory at Fort Detrick, Maryland. The conspiracy, which eventually circulated the globe, claimed that AIDS was designed by the US as a biological weapon with the combination of the already existing viruses, VISNA and HTLV-1 (Walton 2019, 113). This story was able to spread because it was carefully manufactured and curated. In 1983 it was planted by the KGB in an Indian newspaper called the *Patriot* and from there Soviet Media Outlets picked it up. Using pro-Russian scientists, the KGB was able to manufacture proof that AIDS was indeed created by the US government. By 1986 the story was featured in UK's *Sunday Express* and by 1987 it had seen coverage in 40 non-aligned countries (Walton 2019, 114).

Just as sharp power is not a new concept it is also not even a new tool to be used against the US by Russia. And just as the KGB drew on decades of trial and error in conducting successful information warfare operations, so too does the Russia of today use old techniques with new technology. The leader of Russia, President Vladimir Putin, is a former KGB agent and he has retooled old methods to fit a changing information environment. What is different from the Cold War era and the world of today is that changes in technology have made sharp power a more effective source of international influence (Walton 2019, 122).

While Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential Election has been widely publicized by Western media outlets it is important to give a detailed summary of the

motivations of these actions, the implementation of what has been referred to as an “active measures campaign,” and the outcomes of this information warfare (Mueller 2019, 14). To begin with, the motivations for interfering in the 2016 election included personal reasons for President Putin and strategic geopolitical goals for the Russian state. According to an Intelligence Community Assessment, conducted by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) in 2017, Putin’s first goal was to denigrate Hillary Clinton in order “harm her electability and potential presidency” (1). The reason for this was a personal threat felt by Putin from the former secretary of state. Putin claimed that Clinton helped incite “mass protests against his regime” by voicing public support for Russian citizen demonstrations in 2011 and 2012 after parliamentary elections involving “ballot-stuffing” and “fraud” on behalf of Putin’s political party (Barry 2011). It’s also clear that Putin favored a Trump presidency to a Clinton one. Clinton was much tougher on Putin’s foreign policy, especially in Ukraine and Syria, so Putin thought it would be much easier to work with Trump because he took a much less aggressive rhetorical stance against Putin (ODNI 2017, 1). There is also little doubt that proving Russia can sow public discontent in its biggest rival would bolster Putin’s approval at home. Part of the reason Putin has remained the preeminent leader of Russia for so long is because he has led a nationalistic and aggressive foreign policy that doesn’t bow down to Western influence.

Russia’s other goal, and probably a longer term one, was to “undermine public faith in the US democratic process” (ODNI 2017, 1). As was covered earlier in this case study the objective to create a poor image of a rival state is a strategy that the Soviet Union used against its opponents during the Cold War. If the seeds of uncertainty are sown inside a country and in the minds of the international community then both a state’s capacity and legitimacy are threatened.

From a constructivist perspective Putin is trying to undermine the narrative of America as a beacon of stability, democracy, and individual liberties.

Russia's foreign policy goals under Putin have been a desire to reclaim the nation's status as a great power, central to achieving this is the repossession of territory that was owned by the USSR. In recent years Russia has been successful in this ambition with the primary example being their annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Russia was able to annex this territory because it knew that NATO would not intervene to stop it doing so (Gurganus and Rumer 2019). Undermining the US led liberal democratic order is a primary goal of Russia's foreign policy because it allows the state to act with less international checks to its power projections (ODNI 2017, 1). By spreading disinformation to make a more incohesive Western international order Russia can continue to exert its influence into parts of the world it wouldn't have even two decades ago, such as into the middle of the Syrian Civil War. Supporting a Trump presidency aids to this goal because the current president has called for a more isolationist foreign policy by trying to withdraw funding to international institutions and start trade wars with the US's closest allies. In other words, it is in Russia's self-interest to see this non-interventionist foreign policy take root because it leaves a vacuum for Russia to exert itself into places that the US has abandoned. So, what was the extent of Russia's influence in the 2016 US presidential election and how were these operations conducted?

Unsurprisingly there has been a slew of governmental reports and news articles outlining Russian influence operations, but perhaps the most helpful piece of information is the Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller, III's report. Mueller breaks Russia's information warfare campaign during the 2016 US presidential election into three distinct types of activity. These are active measures by using social media to spread disinformation, hacking and dumping operations, and

ties to figures in the Trump campaign (Mueller 2019, ii). According to the ODNI, Russian actions in 2016 were the “boldest yet” and “represented a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations aimed at US elections” (2016, 5). What is significant from this statement is that it suggests a Russia which is capable of and willing to conduct these types of operations. It represents a shift from the post-Cold War Russia that was weakened to an aggressive and resurgent power. Russia was also able to successfully infiltrate the US political dialogue through the use of new technological advancements such as cyber hacking operations and fake social media accounts.

In order to conduct active measures over Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms Russia created the Internet Research Agency (IRA). The first function of the IRA was the employment of people called “specialists,” who operated social media accounts and created group pages (Mueller 2019, 22). Individual accounts would post content in support of the Trump campaign or which denigrated the Clinton campaign. According to the Special Counsel’s report “IRA-controlled” Facebook accounts and groups “made over 80,000 posts [and] reached at least 29 million U.S. persons and ‘may have reached an estimated 126 million people’” (2019, 26). And this was just through Facebook, the Special Counsel’s report goes on to show that IRA accounts on Twitter made “approximately 175,993 tweets [...] in the ten weeks before the 2016 U.S. presidential election” (2019, 28). Part of the success of the social media campaign in reaching large audiences was due to the use of Facebook groups that functioned similarly to the front groups of the Soviet era. An example was an IRA created Facebook group called “United Muslims for America,” that was able to attract more than 300,000 followers (Mueller 2019, 26). While it is unclear how much Russia spent on its 2016 influence campaign it does seem that the creation of new technologies made the dissemination of information cheaper. For example the

IRA was able to purchase Facebook adds for less than \$200,000, but the information was disseminated by countless user and became a part of the political conversation (Parks 2019).

Another facet of the social media active measures was using these accounts and pages to organize political rallies by recruiting a US citizen to set up the event. The IRA would then help coordinate US media to cover such rallies, dozens of which were said to have been organized throughout the election process. A series of Florida rallies were so prominent that the Trump candidate Facebook account posted about a Miami rally in August 2016 (Mueller 2019, 31). This is one way in which technological developments have made sharp power a more important tool in international relations.

The second level of Russia's interference campaign also highlights how the information warfare of the 21st century has evolved, which is the hacking and dumping of sensitive information in an effort to stain the image of the Clinton campaign. Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff (GRU) used special military units designed to target "military, political, governmental, and non-governmental organizations" in order to steal "hundreds of thousands of documents" from "compromised email accounts and networks" of the Clinton Campaign, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), and the Democratic National Committee (DNC) (Mueller 2019, 36). These cyber units then proceeded to dump this stolen information onto the websites DCleaks and Guccifer 2.0. By June 2016 the first wave of leaked documents had been released by DCleaks. Shortly after both websites coordinated with Wikileaks through direct message in order to release sensitive information at the same time. In July Wikileaks released some 20,000 DNC related documents such as emails. Between October and November Wikileaks released more than 50,000 stolen documents from the email account of John Podesta, a high-ranking member of the Clinton Campaign, which had been stolen by the

GRU in a hacking operation (Mueller 2019, 48). While it's unclear the extent to which the release of these emails had on the public perceptions of the Clinton Campaign, they were put onto Wikileaks at the most opportune times for the Trump administration. For instance, although Julian Assange, the founder of Wikileaks, received the stolen emails in June he waited until the Trump Campaign received a series of blows involving the Access Hollywood tape in which one can hear Trump bragging about Sexual Assault. Then on September 7th Assange began releasing the hacked emails changing the focus away from Trump's wrongdoings to things Clinton said on private emails that would make her look bad in the public eye (Shane and Mazzetti 2018). Without the advancements in technology that has made all this information available for highly trained cyber infiltrates, Russia would have had a much harder time obtaining as many documents as it did. This shows the relative increase in the utility of sharp power for the Russian state.

Pulling from a more traditional sense of covert operations the final process in Russian sharp power activities in the 2016 US presidential election appeared to be trying to make direct contacts with the Trump campaign. This section is hard to make into a clear narrative because not all the relevant information on Russia's alleged attempts to influence the Trump campaign through direct contact have been made available to the public. What is clear is that top advisors on the Trump presidential campaign had unusual links and positive opinions towards Russia that seemed to align with Putin's foreign policy goals. For instance Michael Flynn, former National Security Advisor and a senior advisor to the Trump campaign, thought of Russia as a "natural ally" in what he described "as a 'world war' against radical Islam" (Shane and Mazzetti 2018). There is also the infamous Trump Tower meeting in which Russians met with people from the Trump campaign to talk about handing over damaging information of Hillary Clinton, and three

days after this meeting Julian Assange announced that Wikileaks would soon release “emails related to Hillary Clinton” (2018). While this piece of the puzzle is not conclusive, it does add evidence to the fact that Russia is enjoying much more influence in American politics than it has in the past. It illustrates that if the US can support protests in Moscow then Russia can infiltrate, or appear to infiltrate, a political campaign for president. The extent to which Russian actually built direct links into Trump’s candidacy is inconclusive, but the fact that Putin can create a narrative of a vulnerable political system to foreign interference is a huge win for his attempt to paint Russia as a powerful global actor. The amount of uncertainty that remains about what Russia did and didn’t do feeds into a sense of confusion that nothing is to be trusted, which creates a perfect environment for casting doubt on what is real and fake news.

What is gleaned from the vast amount of information available on Russian sharp power activities is their ability to harness new technologies in order to enhance the significance of information warfare. With so many Americans using social media as a form of news it was easier than ever to spread disinformation directly, whereas during the Soviet era the KGB had to spend years building a story through outlying newspapers until it was believable by Western audiences. For instance, the AIDS conspiracy that was started in India and took years to reach its target audience. While it was concluded that no tampering happened on election day, the very fact that the US government had to investigate if Russia had altered voter tallies is sure to shake public confidence of America’s electoral systems (U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence 2020, 38). This is how Russia has used sharp power to mark its place as a resurgent power.

China and Australia

Chinese information warfare is harder to track than that of Russia. For one part the methods of the two different countries vary significantly. While Russia is trying to compensate for a power disparity between itself and the US, China is trying to insert itself more permanently on the international stage and gain a degree of legitimacy. As Nye said in a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, the use of sharp power can hurt a country's soft power capacities, and China is trying to not only exert influence but attract other countries with its successful and alternative governmental model (2018). Therefore, there haven't been as many sensationalist news stories involving China and election interference, like there have been with Russia, which would hurt China's attraction. While Putin may bask in the glory of being able to influence US politics, China is trying to influence the information environment of countries in its growing sphere of influence without attracting media attention, by using propaganda instead of disinformation.

China's place as a world leader has become more and more predominant in the last half century. Its economy has essentially doubled every 8 years since 1978 with an average annual GDP growth rate of 9.5% (Morrison 2019, 5). Since it opened up to world trade in 1978 the state has grown to have a 15.5% share of the global economy making it the second largest economy to the United States at 23.6% (Silver 2020). Meanwhile Russia's economy ranks 11th in the world, which marks an increase from the economic ruin that proceeded the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but puts it behind many countries such as Japan, Germany and the UK. Also, Russia's economic growth has been shaky over the last few years due in part to Western imposed sanctions and an overreliance on oil (Silver 2020).

Both Russia and China score in the top 30 countries in Portland's Soft Power 30 Index (2019). Russia is at the bottom of the list at 30 and China scores 27th, which means that these two

countries have soft power capabilities, but they are much lower than most of the World's developed democracies, like the US in 5th place. The key question we must ask for China is if it is seeking to increase its attractiveness, thus its soft power, abroad or if it seeks to use sharp power to make up for this deficiency? The hypothesis is that China is trying to balance between sharp power and soft power without hurting its global image. What is inherently difficult for rising authoritarian powers like China and Russia is that their "closed model of government" lack the "openness, transparency, and freedom" that is an appeal to other countries around the world (Soft Power 30 2019).

Australia is a great example to use in the China case because the country is a crossroads between the World's two most powerful nations, it is a strong US ally, but China is its largest trading partner. As the People's Republic of China (PRC) aims to increase its global sphere of influence Australia is just one country where diplomatic and covert influence operations are taking place. Looking at these can better help us understand what tools China will use as it takes its place as a global leader.

As China is Australia's biggest trading partner there has been an increasing interconnectedness between the two countries' economies throughout the last couple of decades (Fitzgerald 2018, 60). China's goal in increasing its global influence is using "advanced communication skills" to spread a more positive image of the PRC along with its culture and values. One way of achieving this goal is by trying to exert more control over a country's information environment. In the case of Australia, the tight linkage of the two economies has created opportunities for China's Central Propaganda Department to sign business deals with leading Australian media companies. Many companies seek these deals because access to the Chinese economy is so profitable. A remarkable example of this was a 2014 deal between

Shanghai Media Group, PRC owned, and the publicly paid for Australia Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) (Fitzgerald 2018, 62). At first this deal was hailed as a step forward for diplomacy between the two countries because it allowed ABC to operate inside the PRC's firewall, and talk directly to its citizens (ABC and the Great Firewall of China 2016). The catch to this deal is that the Chinese language version of ABC's broadcasting began to censor news that would damage China's image in Australia such as not reporting on the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre (Fitzgerald 2016). This is significant because it reveals a greater trend by China to try and influence its diaspora to be more pro PRC and even to be "agents of Chinese foreign policy" (Brady 2017, 7).

Along with producing foreign propaganda through media the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been increasingly using their educational Confucius Institutes to try and control the information environment in order to give China a better image from an Australian viewpoint. Confucius Institutes are located across the globe on different university campuses and are designed to teach Mandarin and Chinese culture, which helps to build China's soft power attraction (Wyeth 2019). But Confucius Institutes have also received a lot of criticism for censoring academic work, and university events promoting content that is seen as unfavorable toward the PRC. Examples include CI directors weighing in against allowing Taiwanese cultural events to take place (Fitzgerald 2018, 62). This shows the intersection between sharp power and soft power and illustrates how both are used to change the narrative in the favor of the country yielding such power. The increasing influence that the CCP is having on Australia's university system is similar to that of media operations because of the economic power of the PRC. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese study abroad students come to Australian campuses every year and make up a third of all foreign exchange students in the country. What's more is that

education is now ranked as “Australia’s fourth largest export” (Wyeth 2019). So, it’s clear that universities don’t want to give up the financial support that they gain from both research partnerships formed through Confucius Institutes and the number of Chinese students paying to take classes.

Even as sharp power activities spread throughout Australia, the nation has made itself a unique case by starting investigations and passing laws that seek to curb Chinese influence on their democratic institutions of free speech. One area which has not been covered in this case study is Chinese interference into political workings of Australia. But recently Australia passed two distinct laws through their legislature in order to curb foreign interference.

The first bill was passed on December 10th, 2018 called the *Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme* with the purpose of providing “the public with visibility of the nature, level and extent of foreign influence on Australia's government and politics” (Attorney-General’s Department 2018). The scheme states that certain activities must be registered with Australian authorities if they are done on behalf of a “foreign principle,” which can be any person or organization associated with a foreign government (2018).

The next piece of legislation was in reaction to a finding by ABC that foreign donations from Chinese individuals and businesses donated upwards of \$5.5 million to Australian political parties (Colvin 2016). The *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Funding and Disclosure Reform) Bill 2018* bans foreign donations over \$100 (Parliament of Australia 2018).

The story of Australia passing these new laws has two meanings. Firstly, this hurts China’s propaganda attempts to create a more positive story of their global leadership. What the picture now appears to be is not, ‘we will grow our economies together’, but rather, ‘we will grow our economies together at the price of your political freedoms and independence.’ This

research has made it clear that Australia is just one country of many that face a worldwide attempt of China to harness its sharp power capacities in order to gain favorable economic and political outcomes and therefore extend its sphere of influence. While recent Australian bills give the world a roadmap of what countries might do to stave off this influence, it is obvious that growing economic incentives will make it difficult for many states to act in ways that displease the CPP.

It is also important to note that conducting research on the PRC's attempts to influence their diaspora needs to be carefully crafted so as not to generate racist animosity towards Chinese citizens living in Australia or other countries. A recent study by the Centre of Social Research of Australia National University "found that 82% of Asian-Australians" had reported experiencing discrimination and that many tied a distrust of themselves by Australian society to a general anxiety about growing influence from the PRC (Laurenceson 2019). While it is important to point out the effects of sharp power activities on democracies around the world, it is completely counterproductive to take measures to curb foreign interference if they result in more discrimination and prejudice. Racist attitudes themselves also hurt democratic institutions by sowing polarization and nationalistic attitudes. This makes responding to the threat of sharp power by the PRC even more difficult because it needs to be done in a way that doesn't inflame societal tensions. If the point of staving of Chinese influence is to help protect the pillars of democracy against the distortion of the information environment than these actions need to be taken with extreme caution so as not to hurt Chinese people living in democracies.

VI. Conclusion

As we enter the third decade of the 21st century popular opinion has shifted about the benefits that technology possesses for democracy, coming to the conclusion that progress in technology may be hurting, rather than helping, democracy. A recent Pew survey, that non-randomly canvassed tech experts, found that 49% of these professionals thought “technology will mostly weaken core aspects of democracy and democratic representation in the next decade,” while only 33% of respondents thought that technology would “mostly strengthen core aspects of democracy and democratic representation” (Anderson and Raine 2020). It’s easy to see what the plurality is talking about, with improvements in technology that allow for the creation of ‘deepfakes,’ which create fake videos that look like they have real politicians or celebrities in them (Porup 2019). If we want to preserve democratic norms, then it is imperative to find solutions to the dangers posed from technological advancements.

One of the goals of this thesis was to better understand what the leadership of a more multipolar world looks like when two of the major powers are authoritarian states. Right now, it seems like authoritarian states are doing a much better job of harnessing new technological advancements for their gain than democracies are, like Russia using social media to spread disinformation and hacking into private email accounts and servers, and China putting up a firewall around itself and spreading propaganda in a far sphere of influence. While the “ends” of states interference in elections have not changed, the “ways” and “means” have (Baines and Jones 2018, 12). This is why sharp power is becoming a more powerful source of international strength than it was in the past.

This thesis argues that sharp power is one of the tools that has allowed Russia and China to grow their global influence, and that recent displays of election meddling have shown how

new technologies have made information warfare more powerful. And while there's no doubting the importance of sharp power, this thesis doesn't answer the question of whether it deserves its own category. Is it necessary to have three distinct sources of power, which would include hard power, soft power, and sharp power? In the 'literature review' I bring this question up but don't answer it; what is the place, if any, that sharp power deserves in the lexicon of international relations? It might be that authoritarian governments are unable to generate soft power in an effective way, so they use sharp power in its place. If this is the case than sharp power would probably merit its own form of power. But there needs to be a concerted effort by the political science community to research this topic and make the decision for itself, as sharp power is becoming a more important aspect of international relations.

Another issue that this paper doesn't address in full is why democracies have been so vulnerable to sharp power in recent years. Information warfare has become more effective in achieving its goals because of changing technologies, like social media platforms, but why is it that democracies are so defenseless to this foreign interference? One answer to this question is that Western democracies, especially the US, are not used to being the victim of sharp power activities. Perhaps the US has become too complacent in its role as the hegemon to understand its weak spots.

What also remains unexplored is policies that democracies might use to defend themselves against information warfare campaigns and policies that are already in place. It is difficult to fully grasp the extent to which the governments of Western democracies are responding to sharp power threats because it is assumed that much of the work they are doing is hidden away in intelligence community briefings. This is part of the reason why doing research on sharp power is not an easy task, but it is imperative to understand and explore how

democracies might respond to these threats. One suggestion is that Facebook and other social media companies need to be held more responsible for their actions in this regard. This was made apparent by the fact that the company is taking a “hands off” approach to monitoring political ads in the 2020 elections, allowing anyone to post false information in ads purchased on the site (Isaac 2019). More governmental intervention in this area would surely help to stop the spread of false and politically polarizing information.

Going forward there needs to be a push from the field of political science to understand cyber technologies and information warfare in a clearer way. This thesis gives an insight into what global leadership from Russia and China might look like in the future. How these authoritarian states may continue to try to shift the narrative about their countries through the spread of propaganda and disinformation. Changing technologies represent differences in the changing dynamic of the world and while sharp power is only a small piece of the puzzle that is the global balance of power it is not something that can continued to be ignored.

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