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# WHAT IS “SHARP POWER”?

*Christopher Walker*

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In April 2014, the international arm of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) announced a blockbuster deal with the Shanghai Media Group, a conglomerate backed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Some observers welcomed the arrangement as a breakthrough that might give the ABC more access to Chinese audiences than any Western broadcaster had ever had before. The ABC’s managing director, Mark Scott, hailed the agreement as opening “a whole new world of television and online cooperation between Australia and China,” and said that it would offer “a truly unique window for all Australian media” in their efforts to reach the People’s Republic.<sup>1</sup>

On the surface, the agreement seemed to promise the media of at least one democracy a bridgehead within an autocratic system. Yet this was deceptive, for the accord contained a grave compromise of the journalistic integrity of the taxpayer-funded Australian broadcaster: The ABC management had agreed to eliminate news and current-affairs content objectionable to Beijing from the respected ABC Mandarin-language service, both in Australia and overseas. Chinese authorities had induced the Australians to muzzle an important independent voice.<sup>2</sup>

This was not an isolated incident, but formed part of an alarming mix of ongoing influence operations that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is aiming at education, publishing, politics, and cultural life in Australia, with the goal of infiltrating and corroding its democracy.<sup>3</sup> This influence effort is a work of many years that now seems to be coming to a turning point.

What is taking place in Australia is all the more striking because this country of 25 million has long been recognized for its strong democratic performance. Its vibrant news media, independent civil society, and com-

petitive and pluralistic political scene routinely land it near the top of global surveys of democracy.<sup>4</sup> Australia's democratic polity, one might have assumed, would have an institutional "immune system" robust enough to repel intrusions by even a large and nearby authoritarian regime.

The vulnerabilities exposed in Australia are not a purely local matter. Instead, they form part of a pernicious global pattern. In an era of globalization coupled with authoritarian resurgence, the institutions of a growing number of democracies are straining to comprehend and to deal with the projection of authoritarian influence through more diverse channels than ever before. Australia, like many other open societies, is contending with the effects of "sharp power."

Australian democracy's struggles reflect a changing international landscape. Today, authoritarian powers are shaping world politics in ways that would have been unimaginable even a few years ago. Authoritarian ideas that stress the alleged benefits of giving the state a totally dominant role in political life are gaining traction and momentum. In key countries across the globe, autocratic leaders are gaining power or strengthening their grip. From Hungary to Turkey to the Philippines—to name three places where democratic prospects looked promising not so long ago—this trend is becoming ever more visible.

Even more striking is the resilience and dynamism that the most influential authoritarian states are displaying. Led by China and Russia, these nondemocratic regimes are showing themselves to be firmly entrenched at home, even as they project influence beyond their borders in ways that harm democracy and freedom. As they have become more repressive domestically, these authoritarian governments have grown emboldened and more ambitious internationally, with worrisome implications for democratic institutions around the globe.

The present era of authoritarian resurgence is especially concerning for several reasons. First, it is taking place during what Larry Diamond has called a "democratic recession." This democratic downturn—it has been going on for years now—has sapped the confidence of leading democracies and left them at a loss in the face of the authoritarian challenge. The leading authoritarians are contesting democracy at the level of ideas, principles, and standards, but this is a contest in which only one side seems to be competing.

Second, the autocrats have preyed on the very openness of democratic systems, presenting challenges distinct from those of the Cold War era, which did not afford them so many opportunities for action within the democracies. At home, Beijing and Moscow have used twenty-first-century tools and tactics to reinvigorate censorship and state manipulation of the media. Joseph Stalin reportedly once said, "Ideas are far more powerful than guns. We don't let our people have guns. Why should we let them have ideas?" When it comes to news and information on politically consequential topics, those who now rule in Beijing and Moscow

heed Stalin's advice. Information may be globalized and internet access spreading, but today's leading authoritarian states have managed to reassert control over the realm of ideas. In both China and Russia, the state dominates the information environment, and the authorities use digital technologies to press their advantage.

Beijing and Moscow have found ways to insulate their own systems from external political and cultural influences. Meanwhile, within the democracies China and Russia are able freely to use their media outlets, educational and cultural initiatives, think-tank and policy-outreach programs, and other forms of engagement to influence the public conversation for their own purposes.

Third, the hybrid state-capitalist systems in China and Russia allow autocrats to insinuate themselves—typically through the activities of state-linked businesses—into the commerce and economies of the leading democracies in ways that were scarcely conceivable during the Cold War. China especially has cultivated economic leverage as a tool for getting others to play by its rules, often with a view to limiting free expression. In China, a company's success or failure rests not only on its profitability, but also on its ability to meet government demands. This is particularly true in the information sphere, where Chinese and foreign media and technology firms are obliged to comply with CCP censorship requirements. Beijing has a number of levers at its disposal to induce nominally autonomous Chinese commercial enterprises to do the party-state's bidding.

A crucial feature of this influence projection is how it “flips the script”: The authoritarians are seizing the advantage precisely in arenas where democracies once had the edge. China and Russia are rapidly upgrading their military capabilities, to be sure—the former launched its first home-built aircraft carrier in May 2018. Yet along with such “hard power,” authoritarian trendsetters have learned to make their influence felt in spheres commonly understood to be within the ambit of the “soft power” at which market democracies used to excel.

In this new era of contestation, Russia and China have claimed larger roles on the global stage and have sought to promote their own preferred ideas, norms, and models of governance. This is a far cry from the “unipolar moment” at the Cold War's end, when the United States emerged as the global hegemon and the term “soft power” came into currency.<sup>5</sup> The authoritarians' unexpected ability to carry out digital-age censorship and to exert influence abroad has created a need for new terms that can adequately describe this new situation.

## **Understanding Sharp Power**

Chief among these novel terms is “sharp power.” This is an approach to international affairs that typically involves efforts at censorship, or the use of manipulation to sap the integrity of independent institutions.

Sharp power has the effect of limiting free expression and distorting the political environment. As is stated in the December 2017 report by the National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum for Democratic Studies that introduced the term, it is called "sharp" because it seeks to "pierce, penetrate, or perforate" the political and information environments of targeted countries.<sup>6</sup>

One well-known recent example of sharp power is Russia's blatant interference in foreign elections, with the goal of weakening the health and credibility of democratic regimes. The United States and European democracies alike have been subjected to increasingly sophisticated Russian interference over the past decade. Moscow exploits existing conflicts within these societies to increase polarization and break down democratic comity and consensus. By focusing on elections, the Kremlin aims to undermine basic democratic norms.

Beijing and its surrogates have also scaled up their political interference in democracies, with Australia and New Zealand serving as testing grounds. Australia's authorities have mapped out an unprecedented effort by the Chinese Communist Party to "infiltrate Australian political and foreign affairs circles, as well as to gain more influence over the nation's growing Chinese population."<sup>7</sup> Similar intrusions have come to light in New Zealand, where the CCP seeks to bring local elites under its sway, as well as to secure access to key resources and information.<sup>8</sup> The outlines of such political interference are visible even further afield. In the Czech Republic, the opaque activities of CEFC China Energy offer a striking example of China's efforts to coopt local political elites, a particular threat in young and vulnerable democracies.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond politics, the corrosive effects of sharp power are increasingly apparent in the spheres of culture, academia, media, and publishing—sectors that are crucial in determining how citizens of democracies understand the world around them. The assault of sharp power on both politics and the realm of ideas represents a critical threat to democratic systems.

Sharp power may be used to degrade the integrity of independent institutions through manipulation, as when Chinese entities acting on behalf of the communist party-state disguise their initiatives as commercial ventures or as grassroots civil society initiatives. As the International Forum report observes, the PRC's influence operations aim to discourage challenges to its preferred self-presentation, as well as to its positions or standing. More specifically, the party-state likes to paint China as a benign force in the world. In order to look more appealing in democratic societies, the communist regime is not above clothing itself in the vestments of soft power. State-funded research centers, media outlets, people-to-people exchange programs, and the network of Confucius Institutes mimic civil society initiatives that in democracies function independently of government. Meanwhile, local partners and others

in democracies are often unaware of how tightly China controls social groups, media, and political discourse.

Sharp power may also employ the nefarious arts of distraction. Russia has used such methods to exploit the open electoral and media sectors in a growing number of countries, including the United States. By manipulating the public conversation, it seeks to sharpen tensions within and between democracies. Finally, sharp power can also work via modern forms of censorship, by inducing media to engage in self-censorship or by employing digital tools such as “bots,” automated accounts that spread false and divisive discourse online. Sharp power is part and parcel of the internationalist turn that authoritarian states have taken in recent years, and its effects are increasingly visible in the institutions critical to democracies’ being able to function as free and self-governing societies.

### “CAMP” Vulnerability

In democratic countries, the spheres of culture, academia, media, and publishing (the so-called CAMP sectors) are open and accessible, and they must of course remain so. Unfortunately, however, this makes them ripe targets for sharp-power penetration.

A prominent example is the PRC’s global network of more than five-hundred Confucius Institutes. First launched in 2004, these institutes are initiatives of the Chinese state that straddle the worlds of culture and academia. Located in Africa, Europe, the Asia-Pacific, and the Americas—more than a hundred are in the United States alone—they provide Chinese-language instruction and various cultural offerings through a presence on university campuses in dozens of democracies. Chinese authorities portray the Confucius Institutes as being similar to France’s Alliance Française or Germany’s Goethe-Institut, both of which receive government funding to give language and culture classes. Yet unlike those freestanding organizations, the Confucius Institutes are embedded within educational institutions. Moreover, they employ staffers who at times have sought to block host universities from holding discussions on sensitive topics such as Taiwan or Tibet.<sup>10</sup>

Little about these institutes is transparent; it is hard to say, for instance, what amount of Chinese government money goes to individual host universities. It is also unclear what level of control universities have over curricula within the Institutes. Since the agreements between these parties generally remain confidential, document leaks and requests submitted under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act are among the major sources of information on such matters.<sup>11</sup>

It has become known, however, that there are CCP cells on college campuses in the United States and other democracies. Chinese embassies and consular officials have been detected channeling resources and programmatic guidance to associations of Chinese students in ways that

suggest inappropriate behavior and plans to manipulate the academic environment.<sup>12</sup> Beijing's ambitions in this area should come as no surprise. In 2017, the PRC's education ministry instructed Chinese diplomats around the world to "build a multidimensional contact network linking home and abroad—the motherland, embassies and consulates, overseas student groups, and the broad number of students abroad."<sup>13</sup>

Also at risk of being skewered by sharp power is the integrity of academic publishers. In 2014, Cambridge University Press (CUP) declined to publish Karen Dawisha's book *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* This groundbreaking work of scholarship meticulously pieced together the post-Soviet origins of the current Russian system, but CUP feared libel suits, especially in the British courts. The book was eventually brought out by Simon and Schuster, but not before Dawisha wrote an open letter to CUP decrying what she called "pre-emptive book-burnings as a result of fear of legal action."<sup>14</sup>

In August 2017, CUP took the controversial step of removing roughly three-hundred articles from a Chinese website that hosted the *China Quarterly*. The move came after the PRC's General Administration of Press and Publication threatened to make all CUP-published journals inaccessible from within China. In this case, pushback from the academy and civil society caused CUP to reverse its removal decision.<sup>15</sup> Yet in October 2017, Springer Nature, which is among the world's largest publishers of scholarly periodicals, announced that under PRC pressure it had blocked access on its Chinese-language website to hundreds of articles, many dealing with elite politics, human rights, Taiwan, and Tibet.<sup>16</sup>

It is impossible to know for certain the degree to which intimidation from authoritarian governments has already made scholars and publishers "sensitive-topic averse." The "dirty secret" of self-censorship by Western academics who write about China—and whose careers thus depend on access to the country—may be bigger than previously thought.<sup>17</sup> Exposing the hidden pressures is a first step toward countering the censors' insidious influence.

The stakes of censorship are growing as PRC authorities improve their capabilities. Historian Glenn Tiffert has observed that in the online editions of journals published in the PRC, dozens of articles dating as far back as the 1950s have been taken out by Chinese censors. As with the Chinese government's pressure on CUP and other publishers, this is about rewriting Chinese history to suit the party-state, right down to using a version of the "memory hole" from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>18</sup>

## Authoritarian Media Abroad

Having learned to control political ideas within their own countries, autocrats are now bending globalization to their own ends by manipulating discourse abroad, especially in the wide-open information space

afforded to them by the democracies. Massive investments in overseas media infrastructure play a central role. Russia has crafted a template for information manipulation that can be adapted to local circumstances and is now applied in countries around the world. The PRC has similarly scaled up a multifaceted effort to shape the realm of ideas. The authoritarians aim to assert “information sovereignty” within their own borders while treating everything beyond them as fair game.

State dominance over political expression and communication is integral to authoritarian governance. Such control enables the promotion of favored narratives across media platforms, as well as through the words of state officials and surrogates. In an era of global information saturation and fragmentation, Beijing and the Kremlin understand the “discourse power” that can be exercised through focused and lavishly funded information initiatives.

Russia has greatly expanded its information engagement within democracies throughout Europe and the Americas. The reach of the Islamic Republic of Iran is less wide, but it too is actively projecting influence in the information sphere. The state-run Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) operates a host of international networks that include HispanTV in Spanish and PressTV in English. Sahar, the IRIB television network, has programming in Arabic, Azeri, Bosnian, English, French, Kurdish, and Urdu. There are IRIB radio stations that broadcast in 25 different languages.

But China is in a league of its own when it comes to operating within the public sphere of democracies. Its television, radio, and online initiatives (along with its activities in commerce, education, and technology) are vast and growing everywhere from Africa to Europe and the Western Hemisphere.

China’s and Russia’s controlled-information models exemplify the authoritarians’ approach. In 2013, Russia gathered a number of key information outlets under a single organization.<sup>19</sup> In early 2018, PRC authorities announced the creation of a new media and information super-network called the Voice of China. A release from Xinhua, the PRC’s official news agency, makes it clear that this information behemoth will operate under the CCP’s Central Propaganda Department. Its mission is promoting the “theories, political line, and policies of the Party,” and one of its tasks will be “to channel hot social topics.”<sup>20</sup> As the PRC’s media platforms expand and its largest internet firms go global, Beijing’s ability to curate information in a systematic and selective manner will only grow stronger, especially in places where local media organizations are vulnerable.

One such place is Africa. There, China has made major investments in media infrastructure, and Chinese censorship tactics are being deployed in matters that Beijing deems sensitive. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, Chinese state-media outlets have bureaus with two sets of edi-

tors: There are African editors on the local payroll, but a group of Chinese editors in Beijing vets their decisions, at least regarding stories that the PRC feels strongly about. African reporters might have leeway to cover local news, but they may well find Beijing rejecting, censoring, or altering their content when Chinese interests are involved—all to ensure that China constantly appears in a “positive” or “constructive” light.

The Chinese government gives African journalists “training” and brings them to visit China. Real journalism education, however, is not the goal. Instead, the focus is on taking in Chinese achievements (cultural sites, big infrastructure projects) and on learning how to report from the Chinese government’s perspective.<sup>21</sup> This is part of a global effort that is especially visible in Latin America. China’s president Xi Jinping has said that he wants to bring ten-thousand Latin American politicians, academics, journalists, officials, and former diplomats to China by 2020.<sup>22</sup>

Authoritarian regimes have always sought to identify local actors who can push their line, but the openness and integration of today’s international environment have dramatically lowered the barriers to such efforts. By nestling their activities within the democracies, relying as much as possible on local voices, and using the guise of soft power, authoritarians can introduce their ideas and narratives with unprecedented facility.

Smaller authoritarian states are getting in on the act as well, insinuating themselves into democratic systems and corroding their institutions. The government of Azerbaijan has become notorious for its use of “caviar diplomacy” to evade the standards of key European organizations, especially the Council of Europe.<sup>23</sup> A report released under the auspices of that body in April 2018 found that current and former members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) may have been bribed to soften PACE’s critique of human-rights abuses in Azerbaijan. Investigators wrote of “a strong suspicion that certain current and former members of PACE had engaged in activity of a corruptive nature.”<sup>24</sup>

Sharp power also pierces the digital realm. China, Russia, and (as best they can) other autocratic regimes have applied the online tools and techniques that they have refined for domestic use at the international level as well. Through the online censorship system known as the Great Firewall, Chinese authorities have long been able to manage and restrict what China’s people—the world’s biggest pool of internet users inside a single set of national borders—can access when they go online. Now the government is looking more closely at speech by Chinese citizens on apps and services that are not Chinese, a development that will increasingly impact global freedom of expression. The PRC also has successfully pressured foreign technology and publishing companies such as Google and Facebook (both currently blocked in China) to remove selected content.<sup>25</sup>

Beijing's paramount aim, like Moscow's, is to exert control over key information spheres and the tools for disseminating thoughts, images, and ideas. Its management model is centralized and unitary. The idea is to enable the regime to pursue the systematic information selectivity that is integral to a censorship program and a key attribute of sharp power. As the authorities in Beijing and Moscow deepen their artificial-intelligence capacities, they are likely to harness these technologies to devise ever more precise methods of censorship.

### Sharp Power's Success

When it comes to perforating democratic institutions, "sharp power" has been remarkably successful so far. What can account for this? Sharp power takes advantage of the asymmetry between free and un-free systems. Open, democratic systems are rich targets for authoritarian regimes whose commercial activities and political initiatives are now regular features of life in democracies. It is within this context that sharp power, neither really soft nor hard, is able to flourish.

Authoritarians are keenly aware of this asymmetry, which is why they have been "locking down" public space within their own countries: The last thing they want is for democratic appeals to political pluralism to blindside them at home while they are busy intervening inside the democracies' public spheres. Whether in the realm of commerce or that of ideas, authoritarian regimes play by their own repressive rules domestically, doing all they can to wall off their own political and economic spheres from external influence.

At the same time, they are also using their own rules when playing "away," where the democracies might be thought to enjoy a "home-field advantage." Educational institutions, including major U.S. universities, accommodate Chinese authorities for fear of being barred from China or losing Chinese students. The Chinese government may not always get its way, but it has few qualms about pushing the view that its standards should apply outside China. Given this approach, the deals that Western universities sign in order to host Confucius Institutes on their campuses—which might at a glance seem merely a way to offer some innocuous language and cultural-appreciation classes—are a source of concern. In February 2018, the director of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation publicly warned against the "naïveté" of colleges in the matter of Confucius Institutes and of "nontraditional" intelligence-collection efforts by the PRC.<sup>26</sup>

The influence platforms that the authoritarians have embedded in democratic societies go beyond the educational sphere to embrace the realms of commerce, culture, the media, technology, and think tanks as well. These platforms promote the Beijing or Moscow line while also working to banish from the center of discussion those topics on which the Chinese and Russian authorities would prefer to hear only silence.

According to Joseph S. Nye, Jr., a country's "soft power" rests primarily on three resources: its culture, its political values, and its foreign policies. Since Nye coined the term in 1990, "soft power" has come to be understood by many journalists, policy makers, and scholars as any power that is nonmilitary in nature. Soft power is often seen as something that states pursue in order to "win hearts and minds" and to achieve a positive public image. It is easy to find instances of Western experts talking about soft power in such a way.<sup>27</sup> While the term soft power remains a catchall for describing nonmilitary, noncoercive forms of influence, the consensus among experts, including Nye himself, seems to be that China, Russia, and other authoritarian states are ill equipped to "do" soft power well.<sup>28</sup>

Why should that be the case? The authoritarians' state-centric governance model is one big reason. As Nye notes, "soft power is created partly by governments and partly in spite of them." He adds that "soft power does not belong to the government to the same degree as hard power."<sup>29</sup> By repressing civil society and rigidly controlling political life, authoritarian regimes supposedly place themselves at a disadvantage: Repression squeezes out the creativity and vibrancy that are crucial to soft power.

Nye opines that "China could generate more soft power if it would relax some of its tight party control over civil society." The same could be said of Russia and other countries with governments that prioritize state control over openness, independent culture, and civil society. Yet those in power in Beijing and Moscow are deaf to such appeals. Any real liberalization would threaten their main goal, which is to retain control at any cost.<sup>30</sup>

Soft power may not be easy for authoritarian regimes to exert, but we should not assume from this that they are failing to generate influence and achieve their ambitions overseas. These regimes may not "get" soft power, but they certainly know the uses of sharp power. Overreliance on the soft-power paradigm has bred analytical complacency regarding the growth of authoritarian influence. Modern tools—especially the digital ones—allow autocracies to go largely unchecked in projecting influence within democracies. Much of this influence is not hard, but neither is it really soft.

We should avoid conceiving of sharp power as soft power's polar opposite. It is *not* the case that countries can wield either "sharp" or "soft" power but not both. Some of China's soft-power appeal undoubtedly comes from its investment and infrastructure-building around the globe. Yet as Nye himself acknowledges, when certain lines are crossed, these shifts tell us that states are moving from soft to sharp power.<sup>31</sup>

Take the case of China, for example. The problems that Beijing has with generating soft power are unsurprising: The state-centric Chinese system infuses every educational and cultural initiative with an authoritarian insistence on monopolizing ideas, suppressing alternative viewpoints,

and exploiting partner institutions. As for Russia, its rulers often seem content to propagate the notion that their kleptocratic regime is a “normal” member of the international community, and that its actions and statements are no less legitimate than those of democracies. They can generate this false sense of normality, however, only by sowing doubt and disorder among their rivals. Through sharp power, the repressive values of authoritarian systems—which encourage top-down authority, censorship, and the monopolization of power—are projected outward.

## Responding to the Challenge

The democracies scarcely seem aware that they have entered into an era of contestation. The authoritarians are busily fine-tuning their sharp-power methods and tactics, sprinting headlong down the track while the democracies are still waiting for the starting gun. Thus it is hardly surprising that democracy has slipped behind in the ideas race. Important aspects of the challenge have been hiding in plain sight for some time. One sign of the problem was the CCP’s 2013 directive known as “Document Number 9,” which lists “seven perils” that the party-state wants kept out of China: These include “Western constitutional democracy”; the promotion of “universal values” regarding human rights; Western ideas about media freedom and civic participation; and critiques of the CCP’s record.<sup>32</sup>

The Russian government has mobilized behind a version of “traditional values,” and this too has not been taken seriously enough by the democracies. However cynical and hypocritical the Putin regime may be in making this appeal, it is dangerous for democratic states to ignore rather than rebut such posturing.

History offers a reminder that democrats are not guaranteed to triumph in the competition of ideas. In the aftermath of the First World War, democracy’s gains were reversed and “its aura of inevitability vanished.”<sup>33</sup> Today leading authoritarian regimes, as they did then, are taking the realm of ideas seriously and giving it major resources and attention. Their efforts to speak to the world, to shape understanding, and to subtly undercut or overtly assail the democracies should not be underestimated. Even though it is still unclear what results their global influence initiatives will bring, there can be no question that both China and Russia are spending amply and building a formidable infrastructure to help them win the battle of ideas. They mean to reforge the established rules and norms of international politics. If the democracies cover their eyes and ears, they do so at their peril.

The authorities in Beijing and Moscow today represent the leadership of the “unfree world.” As long as China and Russia remain unfree societies in which independent institutions are unable to hold the top leadership to account, these regimes will continue to project sharp power. The

democracies must reckon with this reality. Given the resilience of the leading authoritarians, waiting for them to fade from the scene is not a sufficient response. To deal with sharp power, a coherent and durable strategy is needed.

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The challenge of sharp power is multifaceted, and so must be any response. Society-wide countermeasures are needed, but we must take care that they do not make things worse. Democracies must remain open—they cannot sacrifice their own standards and values in order to safeguard against the authoritarians’ censorship schemes.

The damage that authoritarian sharp power could do to critical democratic institutions poses both a rule-of-law and a national-security challenge. Moscow’s infiltration into the media space and electoral realm of the democracies has helped to focus attention on this threat, as has Beijing’s wide-ranging effort to regulate political expression. Like universities, publishers, and media outlets, private-sector corporations are finding themselves targeted by CCP efforts to control what can and cannot be said. The spectacle of major global firms such as Delta Airlines, Marriott, and Mercedes-Benz bending to the CCP’s restrictive standards of expression is chilling.<sup>34</sup> Unless a cohesive framework, based on democratic standards, can be established to protect such institutions from sharp power, censorship demands from Beijing will inevitably creep into ever more areas.

A valuable base of experience can be found in Australia, which has recently been facing up to the challenge of PRC sharp-power projection. As John Fitzgerald has noted, Australia is not only “on the frontline” of China’s overseas influence efforts, but also “at the forefront among liberal democracies in generating press, community, and government responses in defense of its sovereignty and institutional integrity, as well as the values—including the freedoms of speech, assembly, and religion—that China’s influence operations place at risk.”<sup>35</sup>

In the case of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, its own journalists in the end held it to account, standing up for core editorial values. There was adverse media coverage, and within a year new executives reinstated the ABC’s Chinese-language news and current-affairs service. The experience of Australia can furnish useful lessons to other advanced democracies now being exposed to Beijing’s brand of sharp power.<sup>36</sup>

It will take thoughtfulness, innovation, and determination to meet the challenge of sharp power. Publishers, university administrators, media executives, and others who find themselves facing the stabs, jabs, and gambits of sharp power must redouble their commitment to

liberal-democratic standards—rejecting all bids to restrain free political expression would be a good start. They must also refuse to let their institutions be isolated and “picked off” by sharp power’s agents. Common standards must be developed, with the aim of reducing these institutions’ exposure to sharp power and safeguarding their integrity over the long term.

We should no longer harbor any illusions about the lengths to which autocrats will go in order to undermine democracy even on its “home turf.” Because in today’s world the autocracies and democracies are integrated and interdependent in so many new ways, the authoritarians must be contested on multiple fronts and levels, including *within* democratic societies and their institutions.

Any response to sharp power must seek to unmask authoritarian influences within the democracies. There is an acute shortage of expertise and information on China and Russia in many settings in which these large authoritarian states are deeply involved. For example, in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and central and southeastern Europe, there are few China experts among local journalists, editors, and policy professionals. Given China’s growing economic, media, and political clout in these settings, there is a pressing need to build capacity to disseminate independent information about the country and its regime. The same is the case for Russia in places such as Latin America.

In this new environment, efforts must be made to break down academic and policy barriers to enable collaboration between experts on China and Russia and regional specialists focused on Latin America or Central Europe. The challenge is global in scope, and the response must take this into account.

To this end, local independent institutions in the democracies should receive help in developing their capacities to detect and highlight the intrusions of sharp power. Free and open societies will inevitably continue to be exposed to sharp power, but once citizens understand how it operates, they will be on their way to helping democracy counteract its distorting effects.

## NOTES

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2. John Fitzgerald, “China in Xi’s ‘New Era’: Overstepping Down Under,” *Journal of Democracy* 29 (April 2018): 59–67.

3. See Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China’s Influence in Australia* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant, 2018).

4. According to the most recent Freedom House assessment, only Finland, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Canada outperform Australia’s aggregate freedom score.

5. The term was coined by Joseph S. Nye, Jr., in his *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

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7. Nick McKenzie et al., “ASIO Investigation Targets Communist Party Links to Australian Political System,” ABC, 5 June 2017, [www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-05/asio-china-spy-raid/8589094](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-05/asio-china-spy-raid/8589094).

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