

Foreign Policy Magazine

Forget Hearts and Minds

Soft power is out; **sharp power** is in. Here's how to win the new influence wars.

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Since its inception nearly three decades ago, soft power has become a foundational concept for understanding how states exert influence. According to the definition the American political scientist Joseph Nye set out in [Foreign Policy](#), soft power is based on attraction, arising from the appeal of a country's policies and political ideals—as well as from its independent civil society and culture. Hard power, in contrast, derives from military might.

In recent years, a third type of power has become increasingly important as authoritarian countries such as China and Russia have tried to manipulate and co-opt culture, education systems, and media to influence democracies. The Chinese government, for example, has focused on advancing support for its policies by suppressing voices beyond China's borders that are critical of the Chinese Communist Party, and promoting supportive ones. Russian authorities, meanwhile, are less inclined to convince the world that Russia's system is appealing in its own right. Rather, they have attempted to make democracy look relatively less attractive, through an attack on the integrity of democracies and on the ideas underlying democratic systems.

This isn't hard power—military force is not really in play. And it isn't really soft power, either. Although some scholars and journalists [frame it as such](#), soft power is typically understood as a country's efforts to attract and persuade. Despite their massive influence efforts, however, Russia and China tend to do poorly in global [public opinion surveys](#). And indices of soft power, such as the “[Soft Power 30](#),” a joint project from the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy, Portland (a strategic communications firm), and Facebook, point to lackluster performance by Russia and China, which routinely rank at the bottom of the index. Autocrats, in other words, are not “winning hearts and minds.”

Of course, a reader may counter that Russia and China are bent on exerting soft power, it is just that [their investments in it have failed](#). Yet it would be strange for decision-makers in Moscow, Beijing, and elsewhere to waste increasingly large sums of money, year after year, without ever considering correcting course. And it is clear, moreover, that China, Russia, and other authoritarian regimes are projecting more influence in their neighborhoods and around the world than they used to—witness [Russia's insinuation](#) into democracies in virtually every corner of Europe.

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What is really going on is that authoritarian states are attempting to exert influence through [sharp power](#), which typically stems from ideologies that privilege state power over individual liberty and are fundamentally hostile to open debate and independent thought. Practice differs from regime to regime, but sharp power usually involves censorship and manipulation designed not to win over publics but to degrade the integrity of independent institutions.

How do we know who is exerting sharp power effectively, and how do we gauge its impact? First, public opinion polls should be set aside. Far more useful would be compiling and categorizing instances of censorship and manipulation, which could better show the ways in which sharp power shrinks the space for discussion or undermines debate. This kind of data isn't necessarily hard to find. For example, the Alliance for Securing Democracy's [Hamilton 68 dashboard](#), which tracks Russian-linked social media accounts involved with influence operations, has started to quantify and contextualize authoritarian disinformation. It might be a good model on which to base further efforts.

In Europe, which has been a prime target for Moscow, reports such as the Slovakia-based think tank Globsec's annual [Trends](#) surveys go beyond measuring the popularity of foreign countries and leaders to register how populations feel about the issues that the Kremlin and other illiberal regimes seek to exploit. For example, its 2017 and 2018 reports found that populations in Central and Eastern Europe increasingly perceive their geopolitical and cultural identity as falling somewhere between West and East. According to Globsec, this creates a "grey zone of vulnerability," which Russia can leverage to stoke tension between these countries and the European Union and other Western partners. Additional studies that compare Russian state media reporting on such topics with local media reporting and social media trends could be useful. They might be used in conjunction with issue-based surveys to show instances in which Moscow has successfully manipulated or divided public opinion on specific issues.

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In September 2017, the China Scholarship Council—a branch of China's Ministry of Education—stopped accepting applications for scholarships from Chinese graduate students and scholars wanting to study at the [University of California, San Diego](#) after the Dalai Lama gave the school's commencement address earlier that summer. China's Confucius Institutes, which are educational and cultural centers embedded in more than 525 university campuses around the world and are considered by Beijing as vehicles for propaganda and influence, present a sanitized, Communist Party-approved version of Chinese politics and culture. The Confucius Institutes are particularly [influential](#) where host universities lack resources for their own dedicated Chinese language and studies programs.

Such forms of pressure are not limited to China. In August, the Saudi government withdrew funding for scholarships for 15,000 Saudi students studying abroad in Canada in reaction to statements on Twitter by the Canadian Foreign Ministry about the repression of human rights activists in Saudi Arabia. Canada's universities now need to reckon with the abrupt withdrawal and relocation of students to other countries. International students typically pay full tuition, and Saudi Arabia represents the [fourth-largest group of foreign students](#) attending universities in Canada.

Given the nature of censorship and self-censorship, it has been difficult to measure the degree to which intimidation from authoritarian governments has already made academic institutions, publishers, and individual scholars shy away from writing about China. But there is some data on the ways in which the Chinese government exerts pressure on [individual scholars](#) as well as reporting on the [problem of self-censorship](#) among those who research China—and whose careers thus depend on access to the country. There are also instances of academic institutions accommodating the positions of the Chinese government absent direct intervention, for instance by [allegedly canceling public discussions](#) that might upset Chinese government officials.

More comprehensive measurements of sharp power might include aggregating and categorizing instances of censorship or coerced accommodation pertaining to particular issues or countries, although this depends on the reporting itself not being subjected to censorship or manipulation. The compilation of a detailed report on the Confucius Institutes in the United States was [hampered](#) by the author's being denied access to key personnel and information. Similarly, in response to an [investigative expose](#) published in July concerning apparent abuses by Chinese contractors operating Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, the journalist who authored the story, [Paul Wafula](#) of *The Standard*, became the target of an intensive [smear campaign](#) aimed at blunting his work.

Finally, sharp power metrics might also include tracking those instances in which the private sector accedes to an authoritarian government's demands. Earlier this year, social networking service Instagram [submitted](#) to Russian authorities' censorship demands by restricting access to posts on its platform regarding allegations made by the anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny.

Meanwhile, examples of international airlines and other corporate entities being [compelled to adopt](#) Chinese government talking points with respect to Taiwan and other "sensitive issues" are becoming almost too numerous to count. And because China is an increasingly important market for the global film industry, entertainment firms (for instance, Legendary, which was bought in 2016 by China's Wanda Group, and Universal Pictures) have been striking deals for easier access to the Chinese market, which also [put them at the mercy](#) of Chinese censors. This leads to content that is either edited to comply with Chinese government regulations or is proactively shaped by cautious filmmakers to exclude anything the Chinese government might consider sensitive in the first place. [For instance](#), the arcade game film *Pixels* [lost](#) a scene in which aliens damage the Great Wall. Marvel's *Doctor Strange* [featured](#) a Celtic character rather than the Tibetan character the original story called for, due to the perceived sensitivity of Tibet to the Chinese government. Compiling the instances of censorship and self-censorship the world does know about could at least start to reveal the outlines of the problem.

In order to understand something, you need to be able to measure it. As with attempts to quantify soft power, it will be challenging to develop precise measurements for sharp power. However, this should not stop analysts from trying. With the stakes so high for institutions critical to the health of democracy, better ways to assess sharp power are essential. In their absence, democracies will remain at a precarious disadvantage when it comes to responding to this corrosive form of power.

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