



Understanding and Combating Russian and Chinese Influence Operations

By Carolyn Kenney, Max Bergmann, and James Lamond February 28, 2019

Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections has focused American attention on the long-standing and complicated subject of malign foreign influence operations. While Russia has brought this issue into the mainstream political conversation, concerns over the ability of foreign nations—particularly autocracies—to exploit the openness of America's democracy in order to influence U.S. policy and politics are not confined to any single foreign actor. In fact, influence efforts by Iran and Persian Gulf monarchies have also drawn considerable scrutiny, as have those carried out by China.¹ Yet when considering offenders' capabilities and positions as geopolitical competitors, China and Russia stand out as the two most immediate concerns.

While foreign influence operations are not new, the convergence of three larger global trends has made them a more important and acute challenge. The first trend is the re-emergence of geopolitical great power competition, which is why the United States' renewed attention on foreign influence should focus primarily on the country's greatest geopolitical adversaries—Russia and China.² However, Russia and China are also bolstered geopolitically by the second trend: the rise of nationalism and authoritarianism around the world, particularly in democracies, which is a driving force behind the unfortunate return of great power competition. Authoritarian regimes have seized on a series of setbacks within liberal democracies to bolster the image of alternative autocratic models of political and economic governance on a global scale.³ In addition, autocratic regimes have exploited the openness of liberal democratic societies to influence and undermine democracy. Finally, the third trend is the digital revolution, which has changed how people communicate; disrupted the avenues through which people receive information; and made it easier to flood open public spheres with misinformation.

The convergence of these three trends has created a significant threat to democracy on every continent. Events in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France show that even the world's oldest and most advanced democracies are susceptible to disruption. Therefore, it is prudent for democratic societies to strengthen their defenses against foreign interference.

In an effort to develop legal and policy solutions to this threat, different democracies around the world are trying to establish frameworks for distinguishing types of influence activities that are acceptable from those that are not. For the purposes of this issue brief, the authors adopt the framework provided by former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in his speech on countering foreign threats, focusing primarily on influence activities carried out or supported by foreign governments that are “covert, coercive or corrupt.”⁴ As such, this brief does not focus on legitimate, benign forms of foreign government influence, such as public diplomacy and exchange programs, but rather on illegitimate, malign forms of foreign government influence—also referred to as “interference” or “foreign influence operations.” Such operations include hacking political campaigns, bribing government officials, and conducting cyberespionage. This distinction is important, especially when it comes to crafting appropriate responses; the focus should be on responding to illegitimate activities in ways that do not restrict legitimate activities. To identify possible solutions to the challenges these regimes pose, as well as where those solutions may overlap, this brief explores the goals and objectives of Russia and China; the broad array of activities they have undertaken in support of these goals and objectives; and how each regime’s actions are similar or different.

Russian and Chinese influence operations

To develop best approaches to these troubling trends, the United States must first understand the challenges posed by China and Russia, including each regime’s motivations and playbooks, as they seek to exert their influence around the world. China sees itself as the United States’ peer competitor and wants to tilt the playing field further in its favor, which has led it to deploy a playbook dependent on perceived legitimacy. Russia, on the other hand, is not a peer competitor—or even a near-peer competitor—with the United States. In contrast to China, Russia seeks to level the playing field by disrupting and subverting the international order. Moreover, its strategy to alter the status quo is predicated not on legitimacy but on chaos. Given the vast capabilities that China and Russia deploy on a global scale, as well as several high-profile incidents of Chinese and Russian interference in the past several years,⁵ it is worth briefly exploring each regime’s strategic intent, their general goals, some of the techniques they deploy in support of their goals, and the similarities and differences between them.

Russian influence operations

Following the end of the Cold War, the United States sought to integrate Russia into Europe and the U.S.-led international system. But Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, saw these efforts as a way to geopolitically constrain Russia, and with its invasion of Ukraine in 2014, it effectively ensured a new era of hostility and geopolitical competition.⁶ As outlined in CAP’s previous reports on Russian influence operations, Moscow’s main goal with regard to the United States and its allies is to disrupt and discredit democratic governance, divide Europe, and undermine the international system built at the end of World War II and reinforced after the Cold War.⁷ Moscow not only sees the United States as a geopolitical rival, but also as the success of democracy,

especially on its periphery, as a potential threat to the survival of the Putin regime. For if there can be democracy in Ukraine, it might then be possible for there to be democracy in Russia.⁸ Successful models of democracy—whether it is the United States or countries in Europe—provide a potential alternative path for Russian citizens to aspire toward; this poses a threat to Putin’s authoritarian regime.

Russia has invested heavily in its influence operations—most notably in its use of information warfare—as a tactic to pursue these goals and level the playing field. Russia’s influence playbook includes the following covert, coercive, and corrupt elements:

- **Disinformation campaigns and the exploitation of online media platforms.** Russian government interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections saw the widespread exploitation of online media platforms. For these information operations, Russia has invested heavily in a whole-of-government approach that taps into the government’s sprawling intelligence and espionage capabilities, criminal networks of cyberhackers, and online trolls bankrolled by government-linked oligarchs.⁹ Similarly, Russia has expanded its investment in state broadcast networks such as RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik to advance Kremlin propaganda and conspiracy theories.
- **Corrupt networks and economic dominance.** Russia uses its network of corrupt oligarchs and its economic weight in certain sectors to exert significant influence over government policy, which it then uses to pressure countries to adopt pro-Kremlin stances.¹⁰ This is most notable in Eastern Europe but is also prevalent in other European countries, such as the United Kingdom, where Russian oligarchs have invested heavily, thus complicating British efforts to respond to Russian interference.¹¹
- **Financial support to fringe political movements.** Russia deploys state resources to fund far-left and far-right political movements abroad with the aim of sowing discord in democratic politics. By elevating extremist voices and using them to promote pro-Kremlin narratives and policies, Russia helps crowd out the more civil and responsible discourse necessary for healthy democratic politics.¹²
- **Extrajudicial attacks and killings.** To silence political dissidents at home and abroad, the Kremlin also carries out extrajudicial attacks and killings—a long-held practice that was most recently, and dramatically, seen in the attempted murder of Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, both of whom were exposed to a nerve agent on a park bench in the United Kingdom.¹³ A series of other suspicious deaths of Kremlin adversaries also bear the clear hallmarks of Russian intelligence operations.

These examples highlight just some of the most potent tools in Russia’s influence playbook and demonstrate the emphasis Russia places on sewing discord and promoting corruption in democratic societies.

Chinese influence operations

While Russia seeks to disrupt and level the playing field, Chinese leaders seek to tilt the playing field in their favor. This takes different forms in different arenas—be they economic or political—and in different overseas contexts. Additionally, in contrast to Russia, China relies on its activities being perceived as legitimate.

As such, China's influence operations abroad have centered around projecting legitimacy by building leverage points over governments, institutions, businesses, and individuals that China can wield when needed. While Beijing's playbook has a variety of means for creating these leverage points, some of the covert, coercive, or corrupt ones include:

- **Financial support to prominent politicians and individuals.** China has funneled money to and essentially co-opted politicians and prominent individuals who in turn promote pro-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) narratives and policies.¹⁴ Recently, this influence was seen in the United States when Sen. Steve Daines (R-MT), at the request of the Chinese Embassy, hosted a delegation of CCP officials overseeing Tibet after he landed a \$200 million deal to export beef from Montana to China.¹⁵ Meanwhile, in Australia, former Sen. Sam Dastyari was revealed to have a number of links with Chinese donors and was recorded reciting CCP talking points on the South China Sea, which were in direct contradiction of Australian policy.¹⁶
- **Distortion of information presented in media and institutions.** China has expended a great deal of time and resources to overtake existing Chinese-language media outlets abroad and establish new ones—which has led to the near extinction of independent Chinese-language media outlets in the United States. Additionally, China has deployed its diplomats and Chinese Students and Scholars Association to pressure and even retaliate against American universities that host events that the CCP opposes.¹⁷
- **Economic dominance and theft.** China has sought to use economic dependencies to coerce partner nations to support its political and diplomatic positions through actions such as purchasing and building critical infrastructure in foreign countries;¹⁸ conducting cyberespionage to steal intellectual property;¹⁹ and providing large loans and financial aid packages to foreign countries—particularly those run by corrupt, autocratic regimes that enable leaders to stay in power.²⁰
- **Extrajudicial kidnappings, harassment, and forced extraditions.** China has attempted to silence its critics abroad through a variety of means. It has carried out extrajudicial kidnappings—including in the United States²¹—and has harassed Chinese citizens abroad, for example, by threatening their family members still in China and by using economic and political pressure, as well as international institutions such as Interpol, to force governments to extradite Chinese nationals back to the mainland.²² Such actions demonstrate the vast reach of the Chinese state and serve as a deterrent to people voicing their views and sharing information abroad, even when residing outside China.

The examples above are just some of China's most potent tools. They demonstrate China's emphasis on building leverage and dominance through vehicles that help it project its legitimacy and power abroad.

Similarities and differences between the Chinese and Russian influence playbooks

China and Russia share broadly similar objectives in terms of wanting to maintain their authoritarian regimes, but differences in their geopolitical positions and internal regime stability lead to important divergences in approach. China sees its regime as having produced an alternative economic and political model that has put it on a stable path to becoming one of two main global hegemonies. As such, China operates more from a position of strength. While China is relatively confident, Russia is racked by insecurities and is worried about its geopolitical decline. Outside the energy sector, the Russian economy remains stagnant and fairly moribund, leading to concerns about regime stability and limiting geopolitical prospects. These differences in geopolitical outlook and economic weight spur different approaches and points of emphasis.²³ China operates with a more discrete, well-funded, long-term strategic approach, whereas Russia has taken on a more blunt, inexpensive, short-term tactical approach.

Additionally, China has focused much of its influence activities on working within existing systems by building relationships with—and often leverage over—governments, institutions, businesses, and prominent individuals around the world as a way to project power, promote economic growth, and prevent any critique of the CCP. Russia, on the other hand, has operated largely outside systems, deploying a wide array of tools to achieve its objectives of sowing discord and undermining democracy. Moreover, while Russia has certainly invested many resources in its interference operations, China, as noted in a recent Hoover Institution report, “is intervening more resourcefully and forcefully across a wider range of sectors than Russia,” granting it “a far wider and potentially longer-term impact.”²⁴

Another distinction between the two countries is that, given China's global ambitions and desire to be seen in a positive light on the global stage, the CCP seems to value having actual plausible deniability for its questionable actions. While Russia will brazenly lie about its actions, China appears more sensitive to the reputational damage caused by such obvious duplicity.²⁵ Accordingly, one could conclude that China aims to take actions that are less brazen or overt, thereby allowing it to disguise these actions as legitimate—though this, obviously, is not always the case.

The success of China's approach, then, relies on its ability to keep its actions hidden. Russia's success, on the other hand, relies on its willingness to accept greater risk and exposure, leading it to take more blatant and aggressive actions. This appetite for risk enables Russia to punch above its weight geopolitically, as it is able to affect world events and project influence disproportionate to its geopolitical power. However, if the case of

Taiwan is any example, it also appears that Beijing is emulating the Kremlin playbook to disrupt democratic processes abroad.²⁶ Unlike with Russia, though, there is no publicly available evidence that China has sought to directly manipulate U.S. and European elections or exacerbate political and social divisions in the United States.²⁷ Indeed, China often claims that it does not interfere with the domestic affairs of other countries at all.²⁸

In spite of the operational differences between Russian and Chinese approaches, both countries are motivated by the authoritarian aim of regime survival, which inherently involves actions that are antithetical to democratic principles such as freedom of expression. Both countries also see covert, coercive, or corrupt influence operations as a normal feature of engaging with foreign countries, unlike their democratic counterparts, which require oversight and specialized authorities to carry out such operations. Perhaps most importantly, both Chinese and Russian government influence efforts exploit similar vulnerabilities in democratic societies, such as loopholes in existing legislation that enable gray areas between legitimate and illegitimate forms of influence.

Regardless of who exploits these weaknesses—whether it is Beijing, Moscow, or even domestic interests—the impact of these interference efforts distorts democratic processes and open dialogue. As a result, the best defense against these actions is to reinvest in the health of democratic systems.

Approaches to countering foreign influence and curbing interference

While some aspects of Russia's and China's approaches will require entirely distinct solutions to effectively counter, there are some policies that the United States could undertake to counter all threats of malign foreign influence. To best respond to covert, coercive, and corrupt foreign influence, the United States should take the following actions.

Re-establish deterrence by making clear to foreign adversaries that the United States will respond assertively to malign interference in U.S. domestic affairs. The first step in deterring countries from interfering is to clearly communicate the potential consequences of doing so and to demonstrate the seriousness of American resolve in halting such activities. President Donald Trump has not and almost certainly will not do that. Therefore, the next American president should establish early on a declaratory policy outlining a significant U.S. response to foreign interference. Deterrence only works when the consequences of an action are clear and unavoidable. During the Cold War, nuclear deterrence worked because the consequences of actions on either side were clear: global nuclear annihilation. However, the consequences for less traditional assaults, such as political interference, are less clear. This is why it is critical for the next president to establish a declaratory policy that makes clear the costs and consequences for any malign interference. America's resolve to act cannot be in question.

Improve information sharing and better coordinate information security practices with democratic allies. As outlined in CAP’s previous report “Securing a Democratic World,” the next U.S. president should convene a summit of democracies, through which he or she should establish a task force to enhance information sharing on malign foreign interference and better coordinate policy responses.²⁹ The task force should focus on the full spectrum of malign interference, including disinformation campaigns, state-based cyber intrusions, bribery and corruption, media manipulation and regulation, and election security. In addition, it should regularize engagement at the working level between willing democratic states.

Reinvest in U.S. public diplomacy operations. The single greatest tool that the United States and its democratic allies have to combat disinformation around the world is to advance a clear, coherent, and truthful narrative about the United States, its values, and its role in the world. Unfortunately, President Trump has catastrophically undermined that narrative by violating some of the nation’s most cherished values at home and abroad.³⁰ The next president must take on the important job of repairing America’s image. To do this, he or she will need to make clear what America stands for in the world and reinvest in public diplomacy tools in order to illustrate U.S. values and beliefs. This effort might include increasing funding for government-funded media organizations such as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL); investing more in cultural and educational exchanges; and empowering the U.S. State Department’s undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs in the next administration.

Work with social media companies to combat threats to free speech and democracy. Social media companies have thus far failed to implement any meaningful solutions to the political disinformation and propaganda that is spread on their platforms. Furthermore, social media platforms have become an intelligence tool for foreign actors—not simply to monitor U.S. residents but also to reach out to and potentially manipulate, compromise, and recruit American citizens at scale. While policymakers must be careful to respect First Amendment rights, there are a number of steps that social media companies can take—and mandatory requirements that the government can enforce—to reduce the threat posed by malign foreign actors.

When it comes to regulating social media companies, all proposals should be on the table. The U.S. government should be more aggressive in notifying Americans when they interact with social media accounts that are suspected to be operated covertly by foreign state actors—similar to how Google notifies Gmail users when foreign actors attempt to hack accounts. Lawmakers should extend the same high level of transparency for political advertising in traditional media to the online sector. There is, of course, also plenty that social media companies should do on their own. For example, bots should be banned or labeled for what they are. The technology to determine low-quality accounts exists; technology companies should use this to rout out the bots

that are deployed on a massive scale by foreign autocrats. Similarly, companies should make it more difficult to create anonymous accounts on their platforms and should give these accounts much greater scrutiny when it comes to violating their own terms and conditions. Platforms should also monitor and revise their algorithms to prevent sources of foreign disinformation from rising to the top of feeds.

Reform, update, and vigorously enforce laws that force greater transparency of actions taken by foreign governments and their agents—be they individuals, groups, or corporations.

The existing measures to increase the transparency of foreign influence efforts, as laid out in the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), are insufficient and underenforced. Compliance with FARA is very low. The U.S. Department of Justice’s stated policy of “voluntary compliance” allows for situations such as those involving Paul Manafort and Michael Flynn, who retroactively registered after they had served in extremely sensitive positions in a national campaign and in the White House—in Flynn’s case, as national security adviser.³¹ Ultimately, however, there is no way of knowing how many people should be registering under FARA who have not done so. Even among those who are registered, compliance is incredibly lax. A 2016 audit of FARA by the Justice Department inspector general found that 62 percent of new registrants filed their documentation late; 50 percent failed to file their semiannual reports on time; 61 percent failed to file informational materials on time; and 47 percent of informational materials did not include the required disclosure statement.³²

Even if FARA were perfectly enforced, it would still only address a fraction of foreign influence efforts. Moreover, it is not designed to address the most pernicious vectors of foreign influence, such as corruption, hacking, and disinformation campaigns. As an immediate next step, Congress should advance legislation that closes existing loopholes in FARA that are regularly exploited through the amorphous statutory and regulatory exemptions—including the Lobbying Disclosure Act exemption, the academic exemption, the commercial exemption, and the attorneys’ exemption. Additionally, the Department of Justice should be required, either through new legislation or by the next president, to develop a comprehensive strategy for compliance.

Close loopholes and more forcefully enforce existing money laundering regulations.

Because foreign powers can use illicit funds to spread influence and even to illegally finance political campaigns, policymakers and law enforcement should address regulatory gaps in money laundering enforcement. In particular, steps should be taken to crack down on money laundering in the real estate sector, which has become a major haven for illicit financial flows.³³ Elected officials should also be required to properly divest from their businesses in order to prevent any real or perceived conflicts of interest.

Conclusion

Foreign influence operations are by no means a new phenomenon. However, as witnessed in a series of recent elections and referenda across the United States and Europe, recent technological developments have made it easier for international actors to quickly and maliciously interfere with democratic processes. Russia and China constitute the greatest threats in both the short and long term. Although their goals, strategies, and tactics may differ, there are important measures that democracies can and should take to respond to and prevent future interference.

Carolyn Kenney is a senior policy analyst for National Security and International Policy at the Center for American Progress. Max Bergmann is a senior fellow at the Center. James Lamond is a senior policy adviser at the Center.

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