

Chinese Sharp Power and
U.S. Values Diplomacy:
How Do They Intersect?

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On February 27, 2019 a three-way juxtaposition cast a spotlight on China's mix of soft power and sharp power and President Donald Trump's conduct of U.S. values diplomacy or lack thereof. The Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations issued its report on China's Confucius Institutes (more than 100) and Confucius Classrooms (more than 500) in American universities and schools; Michael Cohen testified before the House Oversight Committee on the character and potential crimes of Trump; and Trump began what was to be an abortive two-day summit with North Korean chairman Kim Jong-un in Hanoi with strong backing from China's president Xi Jinping. Unmistakable images were left with observers. China had forsaken an opportunity for cultivating an appealing, soft power image as the custodian of the legacy of Confucian values (champion of education, meritocracy, family values, and hard work—ideals that had underscored the rise of "Confucian capitalism" across East Asia), for an ideological agenda that gave rise to "pervasive, long-term initiatives against both government critics at home and businesses and academic institutions abroad," criticism of which Chinese media blamed only on "either fear or ignorance of other cultures."¹ If the State Department had called them "China's most powerful soft power platforms,"² they were increasingly being seen as agents of censorship or propaganda as part of taking advantage of open academic environments to steal sensitive research as well as to create an atmosphere conducive to the exercise of sharp power. Meanwhile, Trump's image, in Cohen's widely watched testimony and in his exoneration of Kim Jong-un from knowledge of the unexplained murder of Otto Warmbier in North Korean custody, reinforced the view of a "racist, con-man, and cheat" utterly uninterested in and incapable of standing for U.S. values at home or abroad. Trump left Hanoi expressing his appreciation for Xi Jinping's important help in this diplomatic endeavor as his pursuit of redemption for this debacle turned to an expected visit of Xi to Trump's home at Mar-a-Lago for the mother of all trade deals bereft of American values. In May, the situation grew gloomier as a Sino-U.S. tariff war intensified against the background of North Korean missile launches and U.S. seizure of a North Korean sanctions-busting ship.

An intensifying backlash against Xi Jinping's makeover of China and Donald Trump's makeover of the United States has muddied thinking about the national identity struggle recently building between the world's top two powers. What was heralded as the "China Dream," benefitting from earlier touting of "harmonious" themes, became tarnished as the "China nightmare" of stooping to any means to steal secrets and undermine other states. The long-admired "beacon on the hill" had become sullied as the valueless and selfish "America First" unable to champion democracy or even truth, which was dismissed as "fake news." The clash in national identities between the two dominant powers on opposite sides of the Pacific is now taking an idiosyncratic form, which challenges us to separate the essence of the struggle likely to be unavoidable for decades ahead from its specific manifestations under the exceptional circumstances of today. Whereas Trump is seen as *sui generis*, an anomaly that is unlikely to put U.S. values diplomacy at long-run risk, Xi Jinping's shift from soft power to sharp power appears more sustainable even if there is reason to assume that another effort will be made to raise the profile of Chinese soft power at some point.

When the Cold War intensified in the 1950s, the ideological battle lines were visible to all, and over four decades they barely changed. As we prepare to enter the 2020s, however, there still is confusion, given that differences over the Chinese and U.S. attitudes toward free

markets have been blurred, that China insists it is not exporting an ideology, and that U.S. clarifications of the meaning of the slogan, a “free and open Indo-Pacific” are still awaited. Recently, however, the rhetoric of the Xi Jinping leadership has become more explicit, and the competition between the United States and China has intensified in all arenas, including over national identity themes. On the one side, sharp power is perceived to be far overshadowing soft power as a foreign policy approach. On the other, values diplomacy draws attention for its surprising absence. Today’s realities deserve close attention but should not obscure the indications of what may lie ahead.

If 2017 was the year of mounting obsession with Russian sharp power, 2018 proved to be the year of increasing attention to Chinese sharp power. As the focus expanded from Russia to China, a similar set of questions was being asked: 1) how was sharp power manifested? 2) what are the comparisons between Chinese and Russian sharp power? and 3) what was the United States, cognizant of the experiences of other targets of sharp power, doing in response? The suggested answers have pointed not only to developments in Sino-U.S. relations, but also to some wider implications for the Indo-Pacific region of an ever-deepening values confrontation. As many anticipate a prolonged struggle ahead between the United States and China, steeped in different and clashing national identities, the prospects for Chinese usage of sharp power and of U.S. effectiveness in the advance of values diplomacy should be on people’s minds, but there has been a shift of attention as Trump refused to acknowledge the blatant use of Russian sharp power on the minds of many Americans, let alone to make Chinese sharp power his concern. In the absence of such concern, others have raised alarm about China’s sharp power and warned that Trump’s indifference to advancing U.S. values diplomacy is resulting in a dangerous vacuum.

In this chapter, I first define and review thinking about sharp power and values diplomacy, then I discuss the impact of Xi Jinping and Donald Trump, and later I focus on how the competition is likely to ensue after a backlash against their recent approaches gains momentum. Adding more specificity about dimensions of national identity in contention, I depict an ongoing struggle with parallels to the U.S.-Soviet struggle during the Cold War, as well as some significant differences.

Sharp Power and Values Diplomacy

Sharp power is interference in internal affairs by stealth, planting agents of subversion, stirring anxieties with misinformation and stolen emails, and targeting elections and public opinion by means of deception. It has acquired entirely new dimensions by virtue of social media and the use of foreign agents and their money to convey messages in new ways. Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig contrast it to the benign attraction of soft power, describing it as “malign and aggressive” and enabling “authoritarians to cut into the fabric of a society, stoking and amplifying existing divisions.”³ While both Moscow and Beijing utilize sharp power to interfere in the politics and undermine the institutions of democracies, they have what Laura Rosenberger and John Garnaut describe as different long-term goals, strategic positions, methodologies, and capabilities, but shared interests in weakening the liberal order.⁴ Eroding the legitimacy of liberal democratic governments as a means of internally bolstering their own illiberal systems of government, each seeks to weaken U.S.-anchored alliances and security partnerships, which limit their reach in each’s

purported sphere of influence. Each has an interest also in preventing foreign individuals, organizations, and governments from criticizing and organizing against them. Defining themselves as being under siege from a hostile world, with “Western liberalism” posing the greatest threat, both work to repel foreign influence at home while engaging in interference abroad.

Australians identify sharp power as means deemed “covert, corrupting, or coercive.” John Fitzgerald explains, “The party’s influence operations in Australia have come to mimic, on a modest scale, the propaganda echo chamber that party propaganda experts have constructed for themselves in China... party functionaries have come to assume in foreign jurisdictions many of the powers and privileges they take for granted under authoritarian rule at home. In the case of Australia, they silence bad stories, doctor texts, and entice institutions...to do the same.”⁵ I drew on Fitzgerald’s article and three others to assert that “[t]here was a shift in the intrusiveness of Chinese interference: on a limited scale from the late 1990s, more actively from the late 2000s, and with unquestioned intensity since Xi Jinping took the helm in 2012. This evolution reflects more clarity on an expansive interpretation of how security is defined, encompassing anything that might diminish the communist party’s ability to stay in power at home and abroad. It is marked by reorganizing of the United Front activities, establishing talking points to boost core consciousness, and mobilizing various layers of advocates to convey these points directly and indirectly. Also important are organizational mechanisms to ensure strong support through the ministries of education, culture, foreign affairs, and so on, to give rewards such as access for conformity and active support. Along with boosters in China and among those sent out to represent China, we find common patterns of identifying targets susceptible to being compromised, even if that is a gradual process. Cultivating local and lower-level officials for their long-term promise occurs alongside offering blandishments to retired politicians and high officials who are vulnerable without their former staff.”⁶

Conscious that Russia has become the standard bearer in depictions of sharp power, Rosenberger and Garnaut contrast China’s approach to Russian interference operations aimed at causing chaos and destruction with scant concern for long-term global stability. Putin’s objective is to weaken the current order to gain relative strength. In contrast, China’s interference activities tend to be subtler and more methodical, with a longer time frame, focusing on steadily cultivating relationships that can be exploited opportunistically in accordance with clear strategic objectives. The two authors add that only China is working to shape the future international system, drawing on a much more elaborate network of proxies and front organizations engaged in United Front work for both undermining opponents and supporting allies through manipulation, deception, and reward. Less obtrusive than how Russia uses sharp power, China’s use leaves more room for the cultivation of soft power.

In the United States, Peter Mattis writes that the Chinese interference efforts can be categorized as “shaping the context, controlling the Chinese diaspora, and targeting the political core.” In the use of both Confucius Institutes and “dark” United Front funding channels, the CCP plays a long-term game. It works hard to find common interests and to cultivate relationships of dependency with mainstream partners, which can be leveraged opportunistically. Drawing a comparison to Russia, Mattis concludes: “The best way to

describe the differences between the two approaches is that the Chinese are human- or relationship-centric.” He writes too that “use of overt propaganda, quasi-covert channels, and covert activities to shape language, perceptions, and actions is remarkably coherent and consistent over time. It involves an incremental process of eroding existing discursive and political structures and steadily building new CCP-centric ones to take their place. For China covers more ground than Russia, systematically cultivating the public discussion in universities, in business communities, in ethnic Chinese communities, in media and entertainment, as well in as politics and government. It operates by co-opting previously independent media houses, establishing new ones, and using Chinese language social media platforms such as WeChat to dominate digital distribution channels.”⁷

“Crossing boundaries established by law and disrupting the normal flow of political or social activity” is premised on making sure there is an absence of threats, not on the ability to manage them by preempting threats and preventing their emergence. Security issues extend to the domain of ideas—what people think could be potentially dangerous. Preemption in the world of ideas creates an imperative for the party to alter the world in which it operates—to shape how China and its current party-state are understood in the minds of foreign elites. In December 2017, the 2014 counter-espionage law was clarified by defining activities threatening national security apart from espionage as including “fabricating or distorting facts, publishing or disseminating words or information that endanger state security.” This is the message conveyed by Mattis in *The Asan Forum*.⁸

Given the priority on forging support for China’s policies and, even more, disrupting any criticism of China, United Front targets are both opportunistic and strategic. The Chinese diaspora is viewed as most amenable to doing China’s bidding. The business community is scrutinized for other promising partners. A third target is the academic and think tank community, expected to be critical in democratic societies, but subject to divisive actions splitting it, given growing dependence on Chinese students abroad, and on visa approval for widely desired travel to China. The media world, too, offers a chance to combat accusers of Chinese shortcomings. The goals are not only negative, resisting sources of criticism, but also positive, shaping a favorable image of China, and sometimes threatening, obtaining intellectual property illicitly, engaging in espionage, and coopting strategic industries. One prize sought when circumstances are favorable is to gain a political foothold in elections and reshape policies in a desired direction such as stopping resistance to China’s actions in the South China Sea. Former political leaders with continued clout are prime candidates for lucrative positions likely to swing their voices in China’s favor and affect popular opinion. United Front interventions accelerated under Xi.

Rosenberger and Garnaut observe that Beijing has begun to undertake Russian-style information operations outside its borders—particularly in Taiwan, a testing ground for its tactics. Weaknesses in democracies are exploited. A global retreat in democracy and an erosion of support for democracy as the best form of government open vulnerabilities and make populations less resistant to China’s tactics. In the United States, this includes hyper-partisanship and growing polarization, racial tensions, wide economic disparities, and lax regulations on foreign lobbying and political advertising. The implication in such analyses is that such shortcomings domestically make the democracies more vulnerable, and, at the same time, they undermine values diplomacy toward other states.⁹

Democratic countries have proven to be vulnerable because their electoral and communications processes can be hijacked by a determined adversary. Values diplomacy, by contrast, is the spread of accurate or idealized information about the positive values of one's country. If done without overkill or a lot of hypocrisy, this can be referred to as "smart power." Failure to sustain a wave of democratic change after the 1990s led to rethinking values diplomacy to make it more convincing through smart power. The backlash against the Bush administration's loss of global prestige and counterproductive use of values diplomacy led Hillary Clinton to seek improvement in conveying the U.S. image; thus, soft power was repackaged as smart power.¹⁰ In great power relations, values diplomacy long faced authoritarian barriers from the Iron Curtain and the Bamboo Curtain. Recently, the flow of information has accelerated, but new countermeasures have complicated the dissemination and effectiveness of even smart power in authoritarian states. Sharp power has gained ground while smart power is abeyant, but a counterattack against the former is gathering momentum along with revulsion against how the latter has been allowed to lapse; a new balance can be anticipated should a backlash follow Trump's values vacuum.

For the United States to project values effectively it should stand as a paragon of the ideals long associated with it: democracy at full flowering, rule of law, checks and balances, equality of opportunity, multi-culturalism and respect for diversity, etc. Trump has trashed every one of the long-cherished ideals of his country, and he has done so on the backs of a Congress increasingly inclined to repudiate these same principles. Meanwhile, he has embraced world leaders who hold these principles in disrepute, while failing to reinforce the identity bonds with allies and partners who endorse them. Rebuilding values diplomacy starts with the presidency and Congress, leads to reaffirmation of the deepest bilateral and multilateral bonds, and demands a values strategy.

China is increasingly accused of breaking the norms of international behavior to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries for foreign policy objectives. It seeks to influence their politics and to shape the flow of information about itself. In the shadow of intense U.S. preoccupation with Russia's use of sharp power, scrutiny of China's use of it has intensified. At the same time, concern has mounted that U.S. values diplomacy has lost direction under Donald Trump. Instead of Washington vigorously presenting itself as a defender of democracy and human rights, it has lost its luster because of both failure of leadership, and failure to set an ennobling example. To the extent that the global community is anticipating a deepening struggle between Washington and Beijing, it contrasts with the Cold War era, when the U.S. stood firmly behind its principles and the Soviet Union had few mechanisms to spread sharp power or anything like it. A contrast can be drawn with the intense Soviet-U.S. clash of ideas in the 1950s-1980s and the still imminent Sino-U.S. clash, even as we anticipate moving beyond Trump's impact while Xi Jinping remains in power.

The Evolution of Xi Jinping's Sharp Power

The roots of Xi Jinping's approach to intellectual conformity at home and sharp power abroad can be traced to: 1) the obsession with "rectification of names" in Confucian thinking distorted by imperial defensiveness, 2) "thought reform" in communist thinking exacerbated by Stalin's paranoia and purge mentality and Mao's preoccupation with cultural cleansing, and 3) blame placed on Western "cultural imperialism" and Soviet ideological vulnerability for Gorbachev's wrecking of the communist movement and his country. That

Deng's reform and opening did not signify full-scale questioning of such premises could be discerned in 1986-1987 with resumption of attacks on Khrushchev's "thaw" in Soviet literature, the ouster of Hu Yaobang accompanied by a crackdown on writings sympathetic to "Asian values" that could pave the way to democracy, and the antipathy shown toward Gorbachev's "new thinking" well before it fueled the collapse of first the communist bloc and then the Soviet Union.¹¹ The lessons for China of Gorbachev's "treason" were often drummed into its citizens over the following two decades before Xi Jinping began his tenure as party secretary in December 2012 by castigating the neglect of ideology in Moscow for the disaster, warning that the same could occur in China. Equating these two exemplars of communism and appealing to the legacy of Lenin and Stalin as well as Mao, Xi Jinping prioritized an ideologically indoctrinated society over any manifestation of civil society.

The April 2013 set of instructions disseminated to party organizations, known as Document No. 9, made cultural work the principal political task, requiring "intense struggle," rather than past passivity on matters of national identity in an effort to eradicate "false trends," a notion that predates Trump's broadsides against "fake news." The targets were strikingly similar, although Xi's agenda was more forthright. The norms of constitutional democracy were attacked as bad because they undermined the will of the people as reflected in their leadership. Any appeals to universal values or human rights were deemed to be an assault on the leadership's pursuit of national interests. The notion that political leadership should defer to civil society is anathema, no more than a tool of the opposition to counter the mobilization of supporters who convey the will of society directly without such intermediaries, who in China are labeled "Western" and "anti-Chinese." "Freedom of the press" is likewise assumed to be a smokescreen for ideological indoctrination contrary to relaying the official line beneficial to moving society forward. Apart from ideology, the struggle is manifest in the treatment of history, in which the entire past is seen as prelude to today's unqualified success, denial of which is proof of erroneous thinking about the past, or historical nihilism. The invisible hand of the market is damned as well, either as neoliberalism aimed at undermining China's economic system and social order or as moves by vested interests who fail to defer to the leadership's pursuit of the public good.¹² Whether Xi is breaking with Deng's "reform and opening" and denying its legacy or Trump is discarding the Republican orthodoxy of Ronald Reagan's attitudes toward domestic and foreign policy, focus is put on one figure not beholden to his predecessors and worthy of unchecked, prolonged rule.

Whereas the assumption behind much of Western thinking about China, even after the harsh crackdown on demonstrators and dissidents in 1989, was that a rapidly modernizing society is bound to relax its controls at home and lean toward integration with international society—a reminder of the minority outlook on Soviet society under Khrushchev—Chinese leaders had a different take on modernization theory and peaceful coexistence.¹³ They were persuaded that they would find ways, following the precedent set by Mao in the Yanan rectification campaign, to socialize the Chinese people and condition them to submit to Communist Party guidance. Xi, in October 2014, commemorated the Yanan model in a forum on literature and art, which preceded increasingly draconian measures to quash dissent and create a utopian mix of what John Garnaut calls "unity of language, knowledge, thought and behavior."¹⁴ At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi intensified his demands for ideological purity and resistance to ideological subversion, refusing to permit political apathy to become the springboard for "peaceful evolution." Whether the danger was Western

incitement, loss of will to resist as perceived in the Soviet Union, or decay associated with the dynastic cycle, Xi found the answer in top-down struggle to maintain unity and resist heterodox ideas. Domestic controls tightened, as external interventions spread. Garnaut writes, “Xi has shown that the subversive promise of the internet can be inverted...It has been packaged to travel with Chinese students, tourists, migrants and especially money. It flows through the channels of the Chinese language internet, pushes into all the world’s major media and cultural spaces and generally keeps pace with and even anticipates China’s increasingly global interests.”¹⁵

Xi not only attacks constituencies he deems insufficiently loyal—ethnic minorities, religious groups, journalists, human rights lawyers—he puts a heightened premium on identity cohesion, launching campaigns against ideological themes such as democracy and constitutional rule, historical themes associated with pre-communist and communist eras, and vertical dimension themes such as civil society and foreign influence in China. With this increased pressure for conformity at home came intensified United Front demands abroad. Noteworthy targets have been Australia, New Zealand, and Canada—all democracies open to outside penetration, all relatively vulnerable to economic pressure and lacking a large population with corresponding international clout, and all with substantial Chinese diasporas subject to mobilization by the United Front strategies available to China. Elements of sharp power are amenable to usage in other types of countries, but the overall package has been most clearly applied in these cases.

Prospects for the Renewal of Chinese Soft Power and U.S. Values Diplomacy

Signs of how the soft power competition between the United States and China could readily be distorted came from the Trump administration as well as from China. Karen Skinner, director of policy planning at the State Department, argued that the Sino-U.S. competition, is not like the Soviet-U.S. “fight within the Western family,” but is with a “non-Caucasian power,” making it impervious to human rights principles. Max Boot warned that this is a foreign policy extension of Trump’s nativism.¹⁶ As for the Chinese side, Xi Jinping on May 14, 2019 hosted the first conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations, indirectly attacking the United States for “replacing other civilizations,” while positioning China as the champion of cultural affinity.¹⁷

China, at times, however, has conveyed an upbeat, soft power message. It minds its own business, never interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. It relies on economic ties, promising a win-win outcome. It prioritizes cooperation over competition in great power relations and as a good neighbor. As the champion of developing countries, China provides generous loans to build infrastructure and accelerate economic growth. It does not impose its values or export any sort of ideology, abiding by a live and let live philosophy. Relationships naturally are harmonious in light of these attitudes. Opportunities abound for bilateral diplomacy with showcase projects funded and built by China, for financial ties through the AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) founded and led by China, and for becoming part of the mammoth infrastructure initiative known as the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). This imagery is juxtaposed with clashing images of the ongoing U.S. foreign policy approach: equality versus hegemony, quiet economic-centered cooperation versus brash,

ideological and military-centered intrusiveness, and getting along with all others versus divisive alliance-building to contain rivals or challengers and support hegemony.

Chinese sources took satisfaction in the 1990s and 2000s in differentiating China's absence of interference in the internal affairs of other countries, from U.S. interference not only militarily but also through ideological pressure under the banners of democratization and human rights. This message conveniently served China's soft power, particularly at the time of George W. Bush's aggressive military behavior and intense advocacy of democratization. Yet, bolder behavior could be discerned in the 2008 Olympic torch parades abroad, in encouragement of the internet outrage toward South Korea in 2008-2009, and in demonization of Japan from 2011 along with newfound assertiveness on regional hotspots from the East China Sea to North Korea. The tone of Chinese writings was changing well before Xi Jinping took command, undermining the soft power that had been accumulated.¹⁸ Xi not only broadened China's foreign profile with his economic and military initiatives, he also put the struggle over ideas in the forefront, initially putting stress on controlling thought at home but soon extending this approach to other states.

There is a strain of Chinese publications that prioritizes cooperation over competition with the United States, that differentiates China's support for the international community from Russia's antipathy to it, and that in 2018-2019 seeks agreements that calm tensions with foreign countries. If it is doubtful in the censored atmosphere authors face that they can call attention to the wounds self-inflicted by Xi's administration due to internal oppression and abuse of sharp power abroad, there is, at least, a starting point for refocusing on soft power through international agreements.¹⁹ In these circumstances, we would not anticipate the end of the ideological struggle with the U.S. and its allies, but a rechanneling of that with clearer ground rules and more Chinese restraint. In insisting that it would not engage in what it calls an ideological struggle reminiscent of the Cold War, China appears to show a preference for soft power competition through national identities.

The ideological struggle during the Cold War was out in the open with Soviets open about their communist ideals, however much they dissembled about the realities that contradicted them, and with the U.S. side showcasing its values, which it came closer to realizing from the 1960s even if the Nixon era witnessed a serious setback. Disinformation was present, especially from highly censored Soviet sources, but it did little to undermine the U.S. political system, while the values diplomacy of the U.S. was largely blocked by the Iron Curtain. Eventually, information filtered into the Soviet Union, helping to create an atmosphere favorable to acknowledgment of false information corrosive of the existing system. While ineffectual Soviet disinformation had little impact on the U.S. system, U.S. values diplomacy played a role in the transformation of its rival.

Yet, even before Trump took office, values diplomacy was failing to have the intended effect in China or Russia. The explanation can be found both in the way each had reconstructed national identity to make it more impervious and control contradictory information, and in the self-inflicted damage to national identity taking place in the United States over an extended period.

Defending the sanctity of democratic institutions and combatting China's sharp power are challenges on multiple fronts. Values diplomacy is bound to be precarious without a solid foundation at home in defense of those very values. The United States has lost much

of its soft power, as seen in international public opinion polls. The Bush war in Iraq on a faulty pretext, the Republican decision to abandon bipartisanship in Congress in order to damage the Obama administration, and the Trump election and reversal of U.S. policies welcomed abroad, have all undercut U.S. soft power. Malfunctioning democratic elections with unrestricted campaign contributions from unknown sources, voter suppression, and other “dirty tricks,” have soiled the U.S. reputation too. For values diplomacy to be more effective, the U.S. should tend to its own democracy, and it needs a president who appeals to less base and self-serving impulses than is the case in 2019. Yet, a foundation remains to do much better. A backlash can be discerned, much in contrast to the doubling down on sharp power that continues in a more monolithic, censored state.

A second factor in values diplomacy is how the United States manages bilateral relations with China since there is a strong dosage of triangularity in relations across East Asia. The U.S. needs to be viewed as fair and seeking a positive outcome even when it is tough and insistent on behavioral changes and reciprocity, shifting responsibility to China for failing to find common ground matters in relations with Asian states prone to hedging and fearful of the breakdown of stability that has enabled them to boost economic growth. This means holding open the door for agreeing on shared values, but values diplomacy does not demand going easy on exposing China’s misbehavior and disturbing values. In the case of Chinese sharp power, a strategy to bring it fully into the open and to work with others in a coalition of democracies and like-minded states is important. U.S. leaders should avoid unilateralism that alienates its allies, xenophobia that makes Chinese in the United States and in diasporas abroad racist targets, and hypocrisy exposing its own shortcomings to comparisons that allow China to win in countering criticisms.

Trump demonized political opponents, the mainstream media, and individuals prominent in opposing his power-grabbing agenda. He, too, had a vision of national identity inimical to ethnic minorities and of historical changes leading to diversity and multiculturalism, thus polarizing American society. His worldview extended to leaders abroad, especially of allied countries, who did not fall in line with his demands, while excusing autocrats who committed egregious human rights violations. Unlike Xi, he lacked control of many instruments of bureaucracy while facing a robust civil society. Trump lacked any strategy to reach out to other nations apart from tearing down multilateral institutions and encouraging those abroad, especially in allied countries, to join in such deconstruction and anarchy. Curiously, the very countries he targets are those with robust liberal institutions, heavily overlapping with the targets of China or Russia’s sharp power.

Will There Be an Ideological Cold War between China and the United States in the 2020s?

Three distinct approaches to interference in democratic countries can be distinguished. In the Cold War era, communist propaganda and operations insisted that democratic ideals were not being met, appealing for support for radical measures to establish a more perfect union. Pointing to contradictions between the ideal and the actual, they could arouse anger. Of course, there were more insidious measures too, such as disinformation campaigns. In the case of recent Russian sharp power another approach can be detected: sowing chaos to undermine trust in democracy itself. In between these two extremes, sharp power applied

by China seeks to use democracy, where laws are weak and flaws in the system permit, to infiltrate in order to realize some specific foreign policy and regime promotion aims. This is not an attack on the democratic model per se, or a plan to press for changes in that model, but an effort to use the flaws in that system in order to serve CCP long-term objectives. The principal means used is not ideology to win over the disaffected, but diaspora ties to appeal to national loyalties as well as money to capitalize on financial self-interest. Both coopting the diaspora and enticing possible enablers, United Front work proceeds covertly and often corruptly with elements of coercion sometimes present, such as in warnings about relatives back in China. The tactics applied to Western companies can threaten their operations in China or corrupt some of their officials in order to get them to enable Chinese policies and even United Front operations in countries where they also are influential. Yet, these tactics fall short of an ideological struggle since China has only recently shifted in the direction of exporting its model of governance as the preferred alternative to the liberal model.

Confucian Institutes and classrooms are a form of soft power, spreading Chinese influence in an overt manner. They promote a positive image of China, as expected. However, if they are ensconced in an academic setting and play a role in undermining freedom of speech, then they cross a line separating influence from interference. There are grey areas between the two that create some fuzziness for observers. If laws and rules are left unclear, actions may not be viewed as illegal or in violation of academic regulations. Corrupting and covert behavior may not be illegal even if it is concerning. In some countries weak laws allowed for such behavior, while in others weak enforcement vitiated the law's intent. How Chinese officials respond to the recent backlash against the Confucian Institutes will test if revival of soft power is sought. There is a different image of Chinese history that could be invoked as well as a more conciliatory image of working with the international community, not attacking its values, that could win adherents.

On the U.S. side there are also reasons to avoid an ideological struggle. The content of values diplomacy should be measured and not prone to extremism. During the Cold War some critics of the Soviet Union lost sight in demonizing it and calling for the most drastic types of response to the need to appeal to public opinion abroad, and to keep dialogue going with those in the Soviet Union who were inclined, however secretly, to both reform at home and better ties with the West. Similarly, the objective should not be to cut all ties with the targets of criticism, but to find a path toward greater cooperation deemed constructive. The U.S. should never be viewed as the country provoking a new cold war, even if it may interpret China's actions, at times, as leading in that direction and seek to deter them and impose a price for them. Idealistic pursuit of peace and harmony when the conditions do not warrant them is not the answer, but neither is rushing to confrontation. Strategic thinking incorporating values should no longer be neglected.

Whereas since 2001 and especially with the rise of ISIS after the failure of the "Arab Spring" and the U.S. obsession with Islamic terrorism, attention has centered on southwestern Asia, some are saying that the number one long-term challenge to human rights is now China. Given recent willingness in China to propagate the "China model," this leads to calls to expose the dark side of that supposed model, concentrating on its recent seamy record as well as the underside of CCP history, which Chinese censorship is intent on concealing. Such transparency is required, rather than silence in the face of the inevitable values clash, aggravated by China's use of sharp power.

Three moves in late 2017 and 2018 contributed to a sharp deterioration in China's image abroad apart from the gathering response to its use of sharp power. First, Xi Jinping's cult of personality and decision to remove term limits as president aroused a backlash to growing authoritarianism. Some refer to "digital totalitarianism" in light of controls such as facial recognition spreading rapidly across China. Second, draconian controls have been imposed in media and academic circles, removing even the semblance of freedom that had survived earlier crackdowns. There is talk of a return to the "bamboo curtain," parallel to the "iron curtain" shielding the Soviet Union in Cold War times and symbolized by what is called the "Great Firewall." Finally, massive incarceration of Uyghurs and other Muslims in "reeducation camps" are proving reminiscent of concentration camps as well as "brainwashing" once associated with Maoist political campaigns and incarceration. Such self-inflicted loss of soft power cannot be ignored by serious U.S. values diplomacy, exposing these abuses more widely. Some are calling for a strong public information strategy to showcase Chinese violations of basic human rights, not unlike the U.S. campaigns of the 1970s-1980s targeting Soviet outrages. This seems inevitable in the current atmosphere.

Methods used to tighten control over thinking inside China are being transferred for use abroad. Red lines are drawn, putting countries on notice of where they must not go if they are to avoid bringing down China's wrath. Efforts are made to manage news, blocking negative coverage of China, and building positive stories. Whereas the most blatant example of Russian use of sharp power was in the 2016 U.S. elections, for China it was in the 2017 Taiwan elections. Each state sought to enflame "us versus them" internal divisions, to capitalize on grievances and biases, and to play on confused identities in order to weaken national unity. Fake news spread on social media sought to undercut some identities while cultivating others. Pretending to be part of one's in-group, writers, who are paid for each posting, take advantage of open media as well as divisions in a democratic society, with digital disinformation. This is the Chinese challenge, which warrants a response.

Conclusion

The immediate challenge is not an ideological struggle between two antagonists, but the threat of Chinese interference operations abroad—not soft power but sharp power. The driver in sharp power operations is overseas United Front work, which is not confined to just one specialized organization, but has become a far-reaching agenda for operatives, for officials of many stripes, and for a far-flung apparatus of persons mobilized for select activities. Distinct from influence activities that are familiar forms of public diplomacy, interference is said to occur when activities are covert, corrupt, or coercive. They are not new—after all in the Cold War era they occurred—but the tools for perpetrating them have exponentially expanded, exploited in an unprecedented manner by China as well as Russia. Confronting sharp power is necessary, but so too is boosting values diplomacy with an eye to a long-term competition centered on soft power and hard power.

Xi Jinping, in line with communist tradition, has reinvigorated ideology, and, despite insisting that his approach is transactional, Donald Trump is driven by ideology, steeped in right-wing, U.S. tradition. Xi's drive for control over thought traces back to imperial China and the Cultural Revolution, while Trump's nativist appeal is heir to pre-WWII America and the South on the eve of the Civil Rights era. Both are a throwback to more exclusive notions of national identity with a clearer ideology, a prouder history, a more closed civilizational outlook, and

a simplistic view of international relations. Each is intolerant of dissent, with elements of paranoia, while at the same time, disregarding soft power in an age of globalization. Clearly, the resistance to Trump, at home and abroad, is intense, as many anticipate his ouster if not by impeachment then by the electorate voting in 2020. Xi is secure in power, but he is now facing challenges and could tilt back toward soft power abroad even if refusing to relax draconian controls at home rather than doubling down on sharp power. But many doubt that he would be so inclined, given China's growing hard power and the insistence of such unchallenged domestic control.

Whereas Russian sharp power has become associated with election interference and many types of covert support for far-right political parties and others helpful in sowing chaos, Chinese sharp power targets a much wider range of actors with longer term goals. In both cases democracies are viewed as vulnerable, owing to weak rules or non-transparent implementation of them. Lax enforcement and low awareness open the door to undercover penetration. Each relies on disinformation, deliberately misleading news about both their country and the object being targeted. Russia seeks to weaken other states, leaving a vacuum and making it difficult to take firm state action on matters blocking Russian ambitions. China concentrates on how to strengthen itself and to shape the world for its further unfettered rise. China envisions partner states boosting economic ties and then accepting CCP legitimacy and state policies, in this way coopting the political mainstream. This will prove difficult if responses are vigorous, but it could proceed in tandem with new emphasis on Chinese soft power opposed to values diplomacy.

Xi Jinping and Donald Trump have raised the profile of cultural confrontation well beyond anything their predecessors attempted. Mostly maintaining Deng Xiaoping's "lying low" dictum, Hu Jintao showcased striving for a "harmonious world." In contrast, Xi has demonized Western values diplomacy while proclaiming the "China Dream" as a pathway to national rejuvenation in opposition to the longstanding liberal international order. Trump both denies George W. Bush's obsession with exporting democracy and repudiates Barack Obama's stress on multilateralism. Instead, his "America First" agenda serves as an attack against that same liberal international order, with culture as well as trade standing in the forefront. Because Trump mostly excludes values from his confrontation with China and Xi has until recently preferred to keep values in the background in foreign relations, some might assume that the rising Sino-U.S. clash is almost exclusively about both trade and the balance of power in Asia, when increasingly it exposes a deepening national identity gap. Post-Trump we can anticipate this coming fully into the open.

Endnotes

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