

## Security Implications of China's Sharp Power

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### Abstract

China's sharp power is a mixed security threat. With regards to the characteristics of its means, it is a new type of non-traditional security threat, but with regards to the object it intends to affect, the security threat of China's sharp power is no different from that of traditional security. Furthermore, in the broadest sense, it can be regarded as a kind of soft power, with the coercive characteristic of hard power packaged within soft power. As for whether or not China's sharp power represents a paradigm shift, further observation of its subsequent influence is still required.

Great power politics and trap effects define the dynamics of China's sharp power. China's ambition for hegemony is stronger than Russia's, so to a certain extent, so-called sharp power can be said to be tailored for the rise of China. In practice, China has wielded its sharp power to avoid the traps of empire, but this has not achieved its desired effect. On the contrary, China has entered a negative feedback loop and has become increasingly reliant on sharp power.

The National Endowment for Democracy's proposal of the concept of sharp power is tantamount to throwing down the gauntlet to China, but democratic values are not a priority for President Donald Trump, and the international state of affairs is not conducive to the formation of a "Coalition against Chinese Sharp Power." Thus, China's sharp power is tied to the survival of democratic values, but a policy of ideological "containment" will not be easy to re-implement.

*Keywords: Sharp power, great power politics, trap effects, containment*

## 中國銳實力的安全意涵

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### 摘 要

中國銳實力是一種混合型態的安全威脅。依其手段特徵，其乃新形態的非傳統安全威脅，但依其所欲影響對象，中國銳實力的安全威脅又與傳統安全無異。再者，最廣義而言，中國銳實力可謂帶有硬實力的壓迫特性，卻以軟實力手段包裝的一種軟實力。至於中國銳實力是否造成典範轉移，尚需視其後續效應。

大國政治與陷阱效應為中國銳實力的驅動力。由於中國爭霸的野心更甚於俄羅斯，故在某種程度上，所謂的銳實力實為中國崛起而量身打造。在實踐上，中國運用銳實力以避開大國興衰陷阱，卻未獲得其所欲的效果，中國反倒陷入惡性循環而更依賴銳實力。

美國國家民主基金會提出銳實力之舉形同向中國挑戰，但民主價值並非川普最重視者，而且國際情勢並不利於「反中國銳實力聯盟」的形成。因此，中國銳實力雖涉及民主價值的存亡，卻仍不易再引發意識形態的「圍堵」。

關鍵詞：銳實力、大國政治、陷阱效應、圍堵

## I. Introduction

Since the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) proposed the concept of sharp power at the end of 2017,<sup>1</sup> discussions about sharp power have become a popular trend. Democracies are concerned over the impact of sharp power and how to respond, and autocracies accused of wielding sharp power to infiltrate others have rebutted all accusations. China especially believes that such accusations are the result of the inability of democracies to accept the rise of China. It has in turn made counter-accusations that similar actions taken by democracies are framed as benign soft power, whereas Chinese soft power is framed as malicious sharp power.

There are both positive and negative discussions about China's sharp power; however, discussions of the security implications over the essence, dynamics, and influence of China's sharp power are still relatively lacking. This paper intends to academically discuss the above topics in succession.

### A. Essence

#### (A) A Mixed Security Threat

The state has traditionally been the subject of security and the referent object of research. War and the threat of force have always been important factors affecting security. However, traditional security is concerned with a dimension that is too narrow and easily generates bias. For example, direct violence dominated the discipline and even became synonymous with security studies during the Cold War, but it is just a subfield of security studies - Strategic Studies. After the Cold War, there was some reflection on how to define and achieve security. As the referent objects of research and the means of achieving security change, non-traditional security studies are increasingly valued by the academia.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power. How Authoritarian States Project Influence," *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>; Juan Pablo Cardenal, Jacek Kucharczyk, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Gabriela Pleschová, Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence* (Washington D.C: National Endowment for Democracy, 2017), pp. 8-25.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Collins, "What is Security Studies?" in Alan Collins, ed., *Contemporary Securi-*

Barry Buzan believes that the debates in international security studies have generally directly or indirectly focused on the following issues: (1) What is the security referent object? (2) Are security issues internally driven or externally driven? (3) Should the scope of security issues be extended beyond military security? (4) What international political theory should be adopted for security studies? (5) What kind of epistemology and methodology should be chosen as the basis for security studies?<sup>3</sup> After thorough examination, we find that the fundamental basis to these questions are “the security referent object” and “the source of security threats.”

First, the referent object determines the dynamics of security issues. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was considered an external threat to Western countries. The referent object at that time was undoubtedly the state, and its essence was holistic and externally driven. After the Cold War, the threat of the Soviet Union no longer existed. Although the structuralists still regard external threats as research objects, increased attention has been given to “human security,” and its essence has been more atomized and internally driven. Second, the scope of security issues depends on the source of security threats. During the Cold War, due to the focus on military capabilities, “national security” was synonymous with military security in strategic studies. At the time, the sources of security threats were naturally war and the use of force, which were the domain of traditional security studies. By contrast, when threats originated from other fields, the scope of security issues correspondingly expanded beyond traditional security, relating instead to non-traditional security. Finally, epistemology and methodology are covered in the choice of research theory. For example, traditional security studies based on realism consider the threat to survival commonplace. The struggle for survival under anarchy is an inevitable result and the primary goal of the state. However,

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*ty Studies*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1-2; Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, “After the Return to Theory: The Past, Present, and Future of Security Studies,” in Alan Collins, ed., *Contemporary Security Studies*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 393-410.

<sup>3</sup> Barry Buzan, “On the Theoretical Framework of Non-traditional Security Studies,” *World Politics and Economics*, No. 1, 2010, pp. 119-122. (in Chinese)

schools in non-traditional security studies believe that such a predicament can be altered, as people cannot fight endlessly for survival. In other words, the referent object is still the crux when defining the difference between traditional security and non-traditional security, as well as the struggle between realism and other schools.

From the development of security studies and related discussions, we can conclude that the “security referent object” and the “source of security threats” are the core issues of security studies, with other related topics being derived from them. The “security referent object” is concerned with “whose security,” and relates to the dynamics of security issues and the choice of theoretical basis. The “source of security threats” relates to the scope of security issues. The use of military force is relatively narrow and belongs to the dimension of traditional security; on the contrary, other subjects belong to the dimension of non-traditional security. Through these two core indicators, we can clarify the essence of China's sharp power.

Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, two scholars at the National Endowment for Democracy, provided the definition for sharp power. They believe that autocracies, such as China and Russia, have taken advantage of the openness of the democracies to export their influence after the Cold War. Moscow only intends to make democracy appear relatively less attractive, as Russia enjoys better optics by comparison as long as the United States or the West looks bad. On the contrary, China is more aggressive, aiming to expand its global political and economic interests, and to suppress criticism abroad. Although China and Russia employ different methods, they all stem from the ideology that state power overrides individual liberty, and they are fundamentally in opposition to freedom of speech, open debate, and independent thought. In order to ensure that democratic populations receive manipulated information, autocracies need to infiltrate the political and information environment of the target country. Such a coercive technique can be called sharp power. Sharp power enables authoritarian regimes to cut into the core of the target country's society, incite and escalate tensions within, and even compel others to censor themselves. The influence projected by sharp power is

undoubtedly malicious and aggressive.<sup>4</sup>

Sharp power as proposed by Walker and Ludwig is seemingly a phenomenon wherein autocracies exert inappropriate means to export their political values to the target country, thereby diverting attention and manipulating public opinion. However, as far as the “security referent object” is concerned, in accordance with Walker and Ludwig, the purpose of China’s sharp power is to expand its global political and economic interests, so its real target is still the state. In other words, the object that China’s sharp power intends to affect is identical with that of traditional security. For example, China infiltrated Australian domestic politics, using agents to influence Australian authorities into respecting Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of the “source of security threats,” sharp power wielded by autocracies is not only diverse in means but also quite threatening in the target country. Many of China’s means of sharp power are packaged within soft power, such as through cultural exchanges – Confucius Institute, economic cooperation – the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), overseas support groups – the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), and academic collaboration with Western think tanks and universities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Walker and Ludwig, “The Meaning of Sharp Power. How Authoritarian States Project Influence,”; Juan Pablo Cardenal, Jacek Kucharczyk, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Gabriela Pleschová, Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, pp. 8-25.

<sup>5</sup> Huang Xiang-mo, the Chinese real estate businessman and former president of the Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (ACPPRC), has donated more than 2.6 million Australian dollars to the Australian Labor Party, the Liberal Party and the National Party since 2012. In 2014, Australian former Labor Party Senator Sam Dastyari received A\$40,000 from Huang to pay legal fees. In June 2016, Dastyari violated the Labor Party’s position and told the media that the South China Sea is China’s own business, and Australia should maintain neutrality and respect China’s claim.

<sup>6</sup> For example, China has established its Confucius Institutes overseas since 2004, but Confucius Institutes are highly controversial due to its opaque operations. In 2014, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued a statement that Confucius Institutes function as an arm of the Chinese government and are allowed to ignore academic freedom. Hungary has benefited from China’s economic cooperation and has repeatedly opposed the EU’s criticism of China’s human rights issues. This is because Hungary is not only a “17+1” member, but also the first EU country to

These means of reshaping foreign views on China and securing Chinese politico-economic interests do not use traditional military forces, so they still belong in the field of non-traditional security. However, their dynamics are still holistic and externally driven, and they ultimately have a direct impact on the target country's national security.<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, the primary objective of China's sharp power is to secure its political and economic interests, as it would not be necessary to infiltrate the domestic politics of the target country and reshape the views of outsiders on China otherwise. Thus, China's sharp power is a mixed security threat. With regards to the characteristics of its means, China's sharp power is a new type of non-traditional security threat, but with regards to the object it intends to affect, the security threat of China's sharp power is no different from that of traditional security.

#### (B) Paradigm Shift?

Walker and Ludwig further explore sharp power on the basis of Joseph Nye's definition of soft power. They point out that a country's hard power is based on its ability to coerce, through means such as military or economic might; on the contrary, soft power is based on the

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sign the memorandum on the Belt and Road Initiative. A large number of Chinese overseas students have also become a new lever for the Chinese Communist Party's united front. Chinese embassies and consulates have mobilized and sponsored Chinese overseas students to participate in patriotic operations through the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA). At the same time, China also established new think tanks in the United States, such as the Institute for China-America Studies (ICAS) in Washington, and the Fudan-UC Center on Contemporary China at the University of California San Diego (UCSD). China even actively collaborates with universities and think tanks, such as the Brookings Institute, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Atlantic Council and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP). The purpose behind it is to compete for discourse power. As China's influence increases, foreign research is inevitably affected and they cannot but avoid crossing China's red line.

<sup>7</sup> In its first issue in 1976, *International Security* stated that energy supply, science and technology, food and natural resources, which seem to be less important, should still be included in international security studies. This is because these factors have a direct impact on the structure of the nation state system and the sovereignty of its members, with particular emphasis on the use, threat, and control of force. See "Forward," *International Security*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer 1976, p. 2.

positive attraction of a country's culture, political ideas, policies, and active independent civil society. However, some techniques employed by autocracies to exert influence, while not "hard" in the openly coercive sense, are not truly "soft," either. After the Cold War, democracies viewed influence from autocracies through the familiar lens of soft power, and were thus infiltrated by autocracies via asymmetric openness.<sup>8</sup>

According to Walker and Ludwig, soft power is attractive while hard power is coercive, but the means of autocracies are neither hard nor soft. Instead, the means are sharp, and will "pierce" the political and information environment of democracies, and so should be accordingly labeled as sharp power. As such, sharp power has the coercive characteristic of hard power, but it is packaged within soft power. Walker and Ludwig clearly allege that Nye's concept of soft power is outdated and unsuited for the current state of affairs, resulting in democracies being deceived and therefore unable to uncover the true intentions of autocracies in time.

The concept of soft power as proposed by Nye in 1990 is undoubtedly a paradigm.<sup>9</sup> Nye's insights into power are also constantly reinterpreted and referenced, such as through the synthesis of hard power and soft power to form effective strategies – smart power is such an example. In response to Walker and Ludwig's appeal to reflect on soft power, Nye wrote two articles to clarify the relevant misconception. Nye addressed a belief that soft power is the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than the hard power of coercion and transaction, and that the term is sometimes used to describe any exercise of power that does not involve the use of force; such a belief is a mistake, and most have misunderstood soft power.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Walker and Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power. How Authoritarian States Project Influence,"; Juan Pablo Cardenal, Jacek Kucharczyk, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Gabriela Pleschová, Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, pp. 9, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, No. 80, Autumn 1990, pp. 153-171.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Nye, "China's Soft and Sharp Power," *Project Syndicate*, January 4, 2018, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-soft-and-sharp-power-by-joseph-s--nye-2018-01>. This is not the first time that Nye has pointed out that the



Sometimes, it is not easy to distinguish hard power from soft power, to say nothing of the difference between both and sharp power. Thus, Nye cited many examples to supplement his explanation. Nye believes that sharp power, the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes, is a type of hard power. Information warfare, for example, is a kind of hard power. It manipulates information intangibly, but intangibility is not a feature of soft power. Verbal threats, for example, are both intangible and coercive. Therefore, the crux is whether power is coercive or not. However, it is difficult to distinguish sharp power from soft power, because all forms of persuasion involve choices about how to frame information. Only when that framing slides into deception, which limits the subject's voluntary ability to choose, does it cross the line into coercion. Truthfulness and openness are the dividing lines between soft power and sharp power in public diplomacy. When China's Xinhua News Agency broadcasts openly in other countries, it is the exertion of soft power. It should still be accepted even if the message is unwelcome. When China Radio International covertly backs radio stations in other countries, that crosses the line into sharp power, which should be exposed. Chinese economic aid under the Belt and Road Initiative may be benign and attractive, but not if the terms become untenable, such as with the Hambantota Port project in Sri Lanka.<sup>11</sup>

However, Nye's explanation was made in hindsight. As he said, when communication becomes deceptive and restricts the subject's voluntary ability to choose, soft power will cross a line and become coercive sharp power. Nevertheless, it is not easy to identify the deception, and when the truth is later revealed, it is often too late. Nye claims that official public diplomacy is merely propaganda and cannot produce soft power, but public diplomacy that emphasizes soft power is also an important part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative once won

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concept of soft power has been misused. It can be seen that similar situations are quite common. See Joseph Nye, *The Future of Power* (NY: Public Affairs, 2011), p. 81.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Nye, "How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power. The Right and Wrong Ways to Respond to Authoritarian Influence," *Foreign Affairs*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-01-24/how-sharp-power-threatens-soft-power>; Nye, "China's Soft and Sharp Power."

the favor of African countries and was beneficial to China's soft power, but the African public's resentment against China is intensifying. This is because Chinese development in Africa has not only yielded no benefits to local populations, but has also generated many negative effects. For example, the Chinese are criticized for violating local mining laws in Ghana, and are also criticized in Zambia for ignoring local immigration laws. Furthermore, China's mining of uranium has not alleviated the high unemployment rate in Namibia, to say nothing of multiple scandals, including tax evasion, money laundering, and poaching. Therefore, the African public is worried that they will become part of China's sphere of influence or colony. However, China still intends to divert outside attention and manipulate public opinion to silence criticism of the Belt and Road Initiative as a debt trap. It is here that China's coercive intentions hidden within the Belt and Road Initiative are revealed. Thus, the Belt and Road Initiative is undoubtedly a tool of sharp power. Moreover, it can also be said that sharp power is state behavior not accepted by international norms and practices.

It is not entirely correct to say that sharp power is a kind of hard power which has a hostile purpose and deliberately deceives others. Sharp power has the same coercive characteristic as hard power, but sharp power has the unique trait of infiltration. By contrast, hard power can achieve the purpose of oppressing others without deception or infiltration. The aforementioned Belt and Road Initiative, having packaged itself in soft power, can infiltrate other countries due to its economic advantages, but this was revealed as sharp power after its deceptive and coercive intentions were uncovered. These qualities of infiltration and coercion meet the requirements of sharp power. If the Belt and Road Initiative had shown the coercive intentions of hard power from the start, it would have been difficult for China to promote its initiative around the world. In any case, we can at least confirm truthfulness, openness, and coercion as the dividing lines between soft power and sharp power, and infiltration as the dividing line between sharp power and hard power. Moreover, it would be more appropriate to say that sharp power is a kind of soft power rather than a kind of hard power.

In fact, Nye already pointed out in 2011 that soft power is only a descriptive concept rather than a normative one. Like any form of power, it can be wielded for benign or malicious purposes. Thus, soft power shares no contradiction with Realism, but it is not a form of idealism or liberalism, either. It is just a form of power and a way to achieve desired outcomes.<sup>12</sup> According to Nye's clarification, soft power does not carry value judgment, and is simply a tool that depends on how it is used. In proposing such a new concept such as sharp power, the intentions of Walker and Ludwig are obvious: they hope to draw the world's attention to the phenomenon wherein autocracies export their values with "sharp" means, and the value judgment herein is very strong. However, such a description is still not outside the scope of Nye's previous definition, and with its malicious characteristic, sharp power actually remains within the definition of soft power.

Sharp power may seem different from the previous dichotomy between soft power and hard power, but it sometimes shares only a fine line with soft power. For example, China's sharp power has the coercive characteristic of hard power, but is packaged within soft power. Once it crosses the dividing lines of truthfulness, openness, and coercion, China's sharp power will remove its soft power camouflage and reveal the hard power of its true coercive intentions. As for whether China's sharp power causes a paradigm shift or not, further observation of its subsequent influence is needed. If it becomes a recognized standard for defining how autocracies export its ideological influence hereafter, has a similar status to soft power, or arouses a sense of crisis within democracies that aligns them collectively against China, then China's sharp power may cause a paradigm shift. But until then, we can only say that China's sharp power is a kind of soft power with the coercive characteristic of hard power packaged within soft power.

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Nye, *The Future of Power*, pp. 81-82.

## II. Dynamics

### A. Great Power Politics

Great power politics have been the main driver for international security studies. It not only brings up security issues but also directs their subsequent development. During the Cold War, the distribution of power in the international system and the interaction between great powers dominated security studies. After the Cold War, even with the transformation of the international system from bipolar to “uni-multipolar,” the importance of great power politics remains undiminished. It even reflects the diversification of international politics while great powers compete for the power to direct discourse.<sup>13</sup>

China has risen due to the success of its reform and opening-up policies. Russia has also risen again on the back of its energy exports. With the rise of their national power, China and Russia have further expanded their influence, and remain subjects of great power politics even after the Cold War. The National Endowment for Democracy's report, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, points out that China and Russia have actively reshaped their image in recent years through local media and academia in Argentina, Peru, Poland, and Slovakia. However, China and Russia did not win the recognition of these countries with soft power. Instead, they attempt to “conquer” the minds of local policy makers and the public by manipulating and distorting information, thus eliminating local criticism of autocracies.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For example, the United States views the world from a unipolar perspective, but other great powers act on multipolar logic. The United States recognizes itself as the creator of the global order and is therefore concerned with the knowledge of causality in order to respond to the problems it faces. In contrast, Europe insists on a wider concept of security, such as what should or should not count as a security issue and how to conceptualize security. See Wæver and Buzan, “After the Return to Theory: The Past, Present, and Future of Security Studies,” pp. 402-403.

<sup>14</sup> Institutional and personnel exchanges are China's most powerful tools in Latin America, and such an engagement reaches and influences almost anyone deemed influential in local societies: from journalists, scholars, diplomats, and students to entrepreneurs, politicians, and future leaders in all fields. When Xi Jinping addressed the Peruvian Congress in 2016, he even declared that China would expand the number of training opportunities of various kinds to 10,000 Latin Americans in the coming

The National Endowment for Democracy defines the influence that China and Russia has wielded toward democracies as sharp power. However, in the eyes of Western countries, especially the United States, China may be more threatening than Russia, as Beijing has a far stronger tendency to export its political values compared to Moscow, as is its intention to challenge the existing superpower, the United States. Russia may only intend to diminish the attractiveness of Western democracy, but China intends to expand its global political and economic interests. China's Belt and Road Initiative is the best example of this. Moreover, in contrast to Russia's weak economy and limited capabilities, China has not only risen but continues to grow. The United States Secretary of State, former Central Intelligence Agency Director Mike Pompeo, also believes that America's greatest long-term security challenge is the threat posed by China, not Russia.<sup>15</sup> In other words, China's future influence on the global state of affairs may be far greater than Russia's.

The Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) held a hearing, "The Long Arm of China: Exporting Authoritarianism with Chinese Characteristics," on December 13, 2017. Co-Chairman Senator Marco Rubio believed that there has already been much discussion of Russian interference in American elections, but Chinese efforts to influence America's public policy and basic freedoms are far greater than most people realize. This is an all-out effort to not simply promote China in a better light but to target Americans within the United States.<sup>16</sup> Thus,

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three years. Furthermore, China even shapes public perceptions favoring China in media, academia and education through the China-CELAC Forum. Although Poland has always suspected anything from Russia, Russia's penetration of anti-American, anti-EU, and anti-Ukraine narratives; and the promotion of a brand of "traditional," "conservative" values as an antidote to the "decadence" of Western liberal democracies make Russian propaganda effective in Poland. This is because these themes align well with the ideology of the present PiS government. See Juan Pablo Cardenal, Jacek Kucharczyk, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Gabriela Pleschová, Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, pp. 27-28, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Bill Gertz, "CIA Gives More Power to Spies to Bolster Intelligence Operations," *Washington Free Beacon*, July 26, 2017, <https://freebeacon.com/national-security/cia-gives-power-spies-bolster-intelligence-operations/amp/>.

<sup>16</sup> Josh Rogin, "China's foreign influence operations are causing alarm in Washington," *Washington Post*, December 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.

the true intention of the National Endowment for Democracy is to use these examples to draw global concern toward the threat of China's sharp power, as the United States itself is a serious victim. Therefore, to a certain extent, we can say that sharp power is tailored for the rise of China.

However, why does China wield sharp power? What are the driving forces behind it?

## **B. Trap Effects**

The rise of China has been a fact. Aside from economic concerns, Robert Kaplan believes that China also poses an ideological challenge to the United States. Due to its unique authoritarian system, China provides dependable development assurances for its people and even its neighbors. To a certain extent, this is at least somewhat attractive to the West. However, China's economic achievements have rendered it too arrogant, and it has overused its own strength. For example, China has excessively promoted its Belt and Road Initiative, but its economic growth rate over the next decade may not be sufficient to support it. As a result, China has drawn close to the traps of empire.<sup>17</sup>

Kaplan brings up the example of the Belt and Road Initiative to illustrate China's excessive expansion, which is both economic and ideological in nature. This is because the Belt and Road Initiative does not solely promote the "Connectivity of Infrastructure," as its "Closer People-to-People Ties" approach with its emphasis on soft power is also an important dimension of its "Five-Pronged Approach." "Closer People-to-People Ties" refers to the bridging of cultural factors that contribute to the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative. The importance of "Closer People-to-People Ties" becomes more evident when "Connectivity of Infrastructure" causes controversy, but "Closer People-to-People Ties"

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com/opinions/global-opinions/chinas-foreign-influencers-are-causing-alarm-in-washington/2017/12/10/98227264-dc58-11e7-b859-fb0995360725\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\_term=.3d2025f73ac1.

<sup>17</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, "The Trap of Empire and Authoritarianism," *The National Interest*, March 5, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-trap-empire-authoritarianism-24761>.

itself is the weakest link of the Belt and Road Initiative. As it is only concerned with the beautification of the Belt and Road Initiative and China's image, and does not actually resolve its controversies, it will eventually become a tool to cover for and push China's sharp power.<sup>18</sup> Hence, as mentioned earlier, soft power is only a tool, and when it crosses the red line, it becomes sharp power, possessing the coercive characteristic of hard power but packaged within soft power.

How does a great power avoid decline? Numerous scholars have identified traps that a great power should avoid. With regards to China, Yaqing Qin, former President of the China Foreign Affairs University, believes that China should avoid the "Thucydides trap"; Nye proposes the "Kindleberger trap"; Yeh-chung Lu, Vice-President of the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, proposes the "James Dean trap." These traps constitute the dynamics of China's sharp power to a certain extent. Moreover, understanding these traps will help in better managing China's sharp power.

#### (A) James Dean Trap

Drawing upon American actor James Dean's portrayal of a teenager lacking the recognition of others in the film *Rebel Without a Cause* as an example, Yeh-chung Lu believes that China should avoid the "James Dean trap." This is because China's current situation and attitude toward international affairs are somewhat similar to the character in this film, in that it believes no one knows China nor wants to know China. Furthermore, China harbors negative and skeptical attitudes toward the West or its interactions with other countries due to its historical legacy. In the era of globalization, mutual trust among countries is very important,

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<sup>18</sup> Nian Peng, the assistant research fellow at the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, pointed out that there are many problems with China's "Closer People-to-People Ties" in Southeast Asia. Most official activities are only one-way communication and not deep enough, and there are not enough Chinese enterprises capable of responding, not to mention their negligence or deliberate inaction. Nian Peng, "How can Belt and Road Initiative achieve its 'Closer People-to-People Ties'?" National Institute for South China Sea Studies, August 31, 2019, <http://www.nanhai.org.cn/info-detail/26/8287.html>. (in Chinese)

and the first step in building mutual trust is to not deliberately misinterpret each other's actions.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, a risen China is eager to gain the recognition of other countries, and hopes to attain the power to direct discourse and a status that befits a great power. From this perspective, it is not difficult to understand why China intends to silence negative opinions from abroad, going as far as to impose its own will and values on others. Negative opinions of China is tantamount to a denial of China, and once China attains the power to direct discourse, it can manipulate and achieve the recognition of others.<sup>20</sup> However, it is not easy for China to win the trust of most democratic countries as a communist authoritarian state, to say nothing of its attempts at attracting democratic countries with its authoritarian system. Moreover, China believes that it is wielding soft power to gain the recognition of others, but Western democracies believe that these means are inappropriate and regard them as sharp power. We can thus say that the “James Dean trap” prompts China to wield its self-perceived soft power to gain the recognition of others, but Western society regards it as the export of ideological sharp power due to China's totalitarian regime.

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<sup>19</sup> Li Ya, “Scholars Analyze US-China Relations. It is Facing Four Traps,” *Voice of America*, July 26, 2018, <https://www.voacantonese.com/a/us-china-relations-and-traps-20180726/4500759.html>. (in Chinese)

<sup>20</sup> For example, Confucius Institutes are considered propaganda tools, and their activities even prohibit sensitive issues such as Tiananmen, Xinjiang, and Taiwan. Matt Schrader, an analyst at the German Marshall Foundation, considers Confucius Institutes to be an autocratic party platform that is hostile to liberal ideas and spreads state-approved narratives. In its 2019 report on China, Human Rights Watch said that Confucius Institutes are an extension of the Chinese government which censors certain topics and perspectives in course materials on political grounds and uses hiring practices that take political loyalty into consideration. Pratik Jakhar, “Confucius Institutes: The growth of China's controversial cultural branch,” *BBC*, September 7, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49511231>. Furthermore, in 2018-2019, the Hanban subsidized Renuka Mahadevan, an associate professor at the University of Queensland, and the Confucius Institute also sponsored the university's launch of formal courses on “Understanding China,” with its contents obviously defending China's official policies. It appears that China intends to use academic freedom to cover its sharp power and train its agents in the Australian academia to defend China's official policies and image and erase criticism against China. See Shiau-shyang Liou, “Observation of China's intervention in the teaching of Queensland University,” *Defense Security Weekly*, No. 70, October 25, 2019, p. 14. (in Chinese)



(B) Thucydides Trap

As far as great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics is concerned, Yaqing Qin believes that avoiding the “Thucydides trap” is still a vital challenge for China, especially with regards to the strategic competition between China and the United States. Thucydides concluded in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* that an emerging country will challenge an established great power, and the great power will in turn contain the emerging country. The two sides will eventually resolve this problem through means of war. From Yaqing Qin’s viewpoint, the contradiction between China and the United States is that the latter regards its global leadership as a core goal and regards the former’s rise as a challenge to U.S. leadership. The United States has not given up its strategic thinking and does not respect China’s political system and domestic order. By contrast, Xi Jinping in 2014 called on both sides to avoid falling into the “Thucydides trap.” The idea that a powerful country can only pursue hegemony does not apply to China. Yaqing Qin even compares China’s “Silk Road Economic Belt” with the “New Silk Road Project” of the United States, believing that China’s initiative reflects the inclusive spirit of engaging in extensive consultation, making joint contributions, and sharing benefits.<sup>21</sup>

Yaqing Qin’s explanation is naturally a unilateral Chinese statement. He also specifically takes the “Silk Road Economic Belt” as an example to indicate that China has no hegemonic ambitions. There is an argument that the Belt and Road Initiative is an independent enterprise, and can operate parallel to the U.S.-led World Trade Organization (WTO), with China and the United States each leading their respective economic orders and coexisting peacefully.<sup>22</sup> However, the Sino-U.S. trade war is still ongoing, and U.S. President Donald Trump has even indicated that the Belt and Road Initiative has the potential to disrupt trade worldwide,

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<sup>21</sup> Yaqing Qin, “Reflections on the Major-country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics,” *Chinese Social Sciences Today*, May 27, 2015, p. B05. (in Chinese)

<sup>22</sup> James Kynge, “China’s Ancient Strategies Create A New Challenge to the West,” *Financial Times*, December 27, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/25975472-ea30-11e7-8713-513b1d7ca85a>.

calling it “insulting.”<sup>23</sup> The United States obviously believes that China has expanded its influence through the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Belt and Road Initiative is an extremely multifaceted global strategy. It is not difficult to understand why the West is concerned that its global order will be challenged by China. But seeing that the Belt and Road Initiative has been identified as a challenge to the U.S.-led world order, and with China and the United States seemingly unable to avoid the “Thucydides trap,” it is not surprising that some controversial soft power projects within Chinese initiatives are identified as sharp power. For example, Richard Fontaine and Daniel Kliman believe that China exports autocracy through the Belt and Road Initiative to undermine democracy.<sup>24</sup> In the near future, the Belt and Road Initiative may soon be labeled as sharp power. The more China reshapes its overseas image through the Belt and Road Initiative, the higher the probability that the United States will perceive it as wielding sharp power.

### (C) Kindleberger trap

Distinct from the argument that China and the United States cannot avoid conflict, Nye believes that there is perhaps no need to worry about China falling into the “Thucydides trap,” as China cannot surpass the United States in the short term, and the United States can thus properly manage U.S.-China relations. However, Nye believes that China may fall into the “Kindleberger trap,” hoping to remain a free-rider after its rise rather than taking on more international responsibilities. Nye still believes

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<sup>23</sup> “Trump rails against China during dinner with executives,” *South China Morning Post*, August, 9, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2158869/trump-rails-against-china-during-dinner-executives>.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Fontaine and Daniel Kliman, “On China’s New Silk Road, Democracy Pays A Toll,” *Foreign Policy*, May 16, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/16/on-chinas-new-silk-road-democracy-pays-a-toll/>. For example, China is exporting surveillance technology through the Belt and Road Initiative to strengthen authoritarian states and stabilize the local investment environment, such as in Venezuela and Zimbabwe. In August 2019, the Zimbabwean authorities used Chinese technology to block public meetings and demonstrations through the internet and social media. See Chong-sheng Zheng, “Chinese-style Surveillance Goes Out, Big Brother Watches You All Over the World (I),” *Radio Free Asia*, September 17, 2019, <https://reurl.cc/62RA6Z>. (in Chinese)

that China has the opportunity to avoid the “Kindleberger trap,” because Xi Jinping has expressed support for an open international trading system. Hence, China does not intend to overthrow the current international order, but it wants to benefit from it and increase its influence.<sup>25</sup>

In a report made during the 19th CPC National Congress, China proposed a global governance concept of engaging in extensive consultation, making joint contributions, and sharing benefits.<sup>26</sup> This concept is the principle of the Belt and Road Initiative, which can be seen as Chinese global governance put into practice. In analyzing the report of the 19th CPC National Congress, Yaqing Qin reiterated Xi Jinping's statement that the Belt and Road Initiative is a global public good provided by China, and it must meet local needs to truly be implemented. Furthermore, Yaqing Qin also pointed out that a country may be regarded as a threat by others when protecting its own national interests. China's current status and image are asymmetrical with its overall development level. With the power over media discourse controlled by the West, many signs will be magnified, misinterpreted, and even deliberately distorted.<sup>27</sup>

Yaqing Qin has implicitly mentioned China's international predicament of not currently being trusted. Perhaps China is unwilling to fall into the “Kindleberger trap” and is willing to assume international responsibilities, but it is still suspected of having ulterior motives. From the Chinese standpoint, the Belt and Road Initiative is not only meant to change China's image but also to provide public goods for the world,

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<sup>25</sup> Yi-jing Wu, “The Father of Soft Power Nye: I Am More Worried About the Rise of Trump than China's Rise,” *Common Wealth Magazine*, No. 361, September 12, 2017, <https://www.cw.com.tw/article/article.action?id=5084922>(in Chinese); Joseph Nye, “The Kindleberger Trap,” *Project Syndicate*, January 9, 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-china-kindleberger-trap-by-joseph-s--nye-2017-01>.

<sup>26</sup> “Xi Jinping: Decisive victory, building a well-off society in an all-round way, and winning the great victory of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era—Report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” The State Council, The People's Republic of China, October 27, 2017, [http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content\\_5234876.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm). (in Chinese)

<sup>27</sup> Yaqing Qin, “Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress and the New Era of China's Diplomacy,” *Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Affairs*, No. 3, 2018, pp. 3-4. (in Chinese)

different from the Marshall Plan in its “business is business” approach. However, some participating countries have become insolvent, and have needed to pledge important strategic assets or ports to China, such as Djibouti allowing for Chinese military bases to be built and Sri Lanka leasing Hambantota Port. Distrust explains why Western democracies accuse China of wielding sharp power, but China providing infrastructure incompatible with the needs of host countries and saddling them with liabilities with its deceptive behavior also plays a role. This is why some claim that the Belt and Road Initiative is a form of debt trap diplomacy.

To eliminate the negative perception of its Belt and Road Initiative, China has constantly manipulated information on various occasions to win the trust of others. For example, during a briefing for Chinese and foreign media at “The Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation” in April 2019, Chinese Foreign Minister Yi Wang refuted a journalist’s suspicions with the specific figure of 126 countries and 29 international organizations currently signed with the Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, China has also promoted “Grand External Propaganda” in partner countries of the Belt and Road Initiative. In June 2018, China convened the Belt and Road Journalists Forum, with 100 media representatives from 47 countries participating. In September 2019, the Belt and Road News Network (BRNN) was established in Beijing. Its website publishes news in six languages, but its content comes from the *People’s Daily*, promoting positive content about the Belt and Road Initiative while deliberately ignoring negative news about China.

During the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in September 2018, China announced that it will contribute another 60 billion U.S. dollars to assist African development over the next three years without any political conditions, and it will forgive the debts of some impoverished African countries. Furthermore, China also arranged for Cyril Ramaphosa, President of South Africa, to refute the accusation that China is engaged in “neocolonialism” in Africa, instead emphasizing that African countries welcome the Belt and Road Initiative. However, Chinese propaganda was blunted by Tanzania’s boycott of the Belt and Road Initiative in April 2020. John Magufuli, President of Tanzania,

believes that the Bagamoyo Port project is not beneficial to Tanzania and has asked for renegotiation on the plan for years, but China is concerned over the cascading effects that the resumption of negotiations in Africa may bring, and has ignored Tanzania's request.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, China's means is in line with the description provided by Walker and Ludwig. China has greatly expanded its global economic and trade interests, masking its policies with the influential initiative, and suppressing criticism abroad as much as possible. This is the objective of Chinese sharp power: diverting attention and manipulating public opinion.<sup>29</sup> As an economic strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative then turns into a tool for sharp power, and China utilizes the needed economic aid to force the leaders of target countries to spread untruthful and manipulated information to the international community. Moreover, China also utilizes the Belt and Road Initiative to export its media influence to partner countries, beautifying the initiative and coordinating with "Grand External Propaganda." To a certain extent, the "Kindleberger trap" has indirectly driven China into wielding sharp power.

### III. Influence

#### A. The Struggle between Democracy and Autocracy

In terms of sharp power, Nye draws upon different insights from others. Nye believes that means similar to sharp power have already been used before, so sharp power is only a "new term" that describes an "old threat." After all, the manipulation of ideas, political perceptions, and electoral processes has a long history. Both the United States and the Soviet Union used the same means during the Cold War. For example, the United States secretly funded the Italian anti-communist party, assisting it in the 1948 election. The Central Intelligence Agency also secretly funded the anti-communist group "Congress for Cultural Freedom." The Soviet

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<sup>28</sup> Shiau-shyang Liou, "On Tanzania's Abolition of China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' Agreement," *National Defense Security Immediate Analysis*, No. 10, April 28, 2020, pp. 1-3. (in Chinese)

<sup>29</sup> Walker and Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power. How Authoritarian States Project Influence."

KGB fabricated fake news in the 1980s and claimed that the HIV virus was produced through U.S. biochemical weapons experiments.<sup>30</sup> Thus, this is not the first time democracies and non-democracies have confronted each other using means similar to sharp power. However, this scenario between democracies and communist countries now feature democracies and autocracies as the new protagonists.

As Nye mentioned, soft power is only a tool and does not carry value judgment. Democracies use the term “sharp” to describe sharp power because autocracies deploy means that “sharply” pierce democratic systems, threatening their democratic values and national security. However, from the viewpoint of Beijing or Moscow, the use of soft power by democracies to promote democratization may be real “sharp power,” because soft power also “sharply” pierces authoritarian systems. The Soviet Union collapsed due in part to soft power, and China has been fortunate enough to overcome such trials. The crux may be that autocratic political and media systems do not allow the free generation or dissemination of information within or without, but openness is taken for granted in democracies. From this perspective, it can be surmised that both soft power and sharp power are tools in essence, and the underlying crux of the matter is actually the conflict of values between democracies and autocracies.

## **B. “Containment” Again?**

The primary objective of the National Endowment for Democracy in proposing the concept of sharp power is to draw democratic attention to the challenge of sharp power from autocracies, especially China. The National Endowment for Democracy has a strong governmental slant and its task is to promote democratization around the world. As its main source of funding comes from the U.S. Congress and the Department of State, the actions of the National Endowment for Democracy are often regarded as a reflection of official U.S. intentions. This is why China believes that the National Endowment for Democracy intends to engage in regime change.

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<sup>30</sup> Joseph Nye, “How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power: The Right and Wrong Ways to Respond to Authoritarian Influence.”

For example, the Hong Kong *Wen Wei Po* newspaper pointed out that the National Endowment for Democracy secretly supported the activities of the “Occupy Central with Love and Peace” movement.<sup>31</sup> Hence, to a certain extent, China's sharp power may be regarded as a counterattack by autocracies against democracies, especially toward the United States.

How do we respond to China's sharp power? Walker and Ludwig believe that democracies are satisfied with the soft power model, so they ignore sharp power, fail to reach a consensus, and cannot marshal effective responses to sharp power. What democracies can do now is to uncover the channels through which autocracies wield sharp power and reaffirm its own democratic values.<sup>32</sup> Nye believes that openness is simultaneously a disadvantage and yet also an advantage of democracies. Maintaining a policy of openness is still the best defense, as it is the source of democracy's power of attraction and persuasion. Democracies should be cautious if they wish to imitate the same offensive behavior, as this may hurt their soft power.<sup>33</sup> By comparison, *The Economist's* proposal is relatively tough. It maintains that there should be some practical defenses, and assets such as counter-intelligence, law, and an independent media are the best protections against subversion. In addition to sticking to principles and not engaging in witch hunts, Western democracies should coordinate if possible, and act independently when necessary. The first step in avoiding the “Thucydides trap” for Western democracies is to use its own values to blunt China's sharp power.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps democracies have not yet reached a consensus nor conceived an appropriate defense strategy in response to China's sharp power. Thus, the countermeasures we currently know of are mostly conservative. Regardless, the actions of the National Endowment for Democracy are tantamount to throwing down the gauntlet to China, but will democracies form a “Coalition against Chinese Sharp Power,” or even

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<sup>31</sup> “Foreign Think Tanks Kicked Off behind the Scenes to Support ‘Occupation’,” *Wen Wei Po*, October 2, 2014, p. A11. (in Chinese)

<sup>32</sup> Walker and Ludwig, “The Meaning of Sharp Power. How Authoritarian States Project Influence.”

<sup>33</sup> Nye, “How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power: The Right and Wrong Ways to Respond to Authoritarian Influence.”

<sup>34</sup> “Sharp Power,” *The Economist*, December 16-22, 2017, p. 9.

pursue a policy akin to “containment” during the Cold War once more?

The current state of affairs is similar to that of the Cold War, but there are also differences. During the Cold War, the United States' containment of the Soviet Union was not limited to hard power confrontations through measures such as proxy wars and the arms race, but also other forms of confrontations. The United States invested deeply in cultural diplomacy and psychological warfare, and Truman's “Campaign of Truth” remains an excellent example, viewing the propagation of truth as the best strategy to win hearts and minds worldwide. The United States' support for Greece, Italy, and Turkey after World War II is another example, and it later prevented communist expansion by assisting in European reconstruction through the Marshall Plan. Owing to the appeal of the United States, democracies quickly assembled and confronted the communist bloc. Although the current struggle between soft power and sharp power is similar to the Cold War in how values and ideology are entwined in both, they are not entirely the same on a practical level.

The United States under the Trump administration has been very different from the past. Nye believes that Trump is abandoning the international public goods that the United States has provided since World War II and returning the country to isolationism.<sup>35</sup> Although the United States has withdrawn from several treaties and institutions after Trump assumed the presidency, he has actually involved himself in world affairs selectively rather than being truly isolated. Trump has not only launched trade wars with several countries but also resumed sanctions against Iran. He is also the only U.S. President who has met with the North Korean head of state. Rather than suggest that the U.S. is returning to a policy of isolationism, it is perhaps better to suggest that the country is awkwardly “isolated.” Such an awkward “isolation” is naturally based on Trump's personal standards. Although Trump's behavior is unpredictable, there are still a number of contexts to follow.

“America First” is undoubtedly Trump's primary principle, and he

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<sup>35</sup> Jing-ling Jiang, “Nye, the Father of Soft Power, Analyzes the Smart Power of the U.S. and China,” *China Times*, November 6, 2017, p. A9. (in Chinese)



aims to make the United States great again economically, but it has also put the United States at odds with its traditional allies, as many of them have a high trade surplus with the United States. Like his predecessors, Trump is dissatisfied with current international regimes, but he has turned his dissatisfaction into practical action. Trump also rarely expresses interest in democracy or human rights, to say nothing of so-called universal values or common values. For example, Fontaine and Kliman warn that a wealthy and more globalized China has not become more democratic. Beijing is exporting its narrow values overseas through its economic strength and the Belt and Road Initiative. The countries that cannot afford to repay its loans can only be politically attached to Beijing and cannot enjoy freedom of speech. The countries that benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative are not only less willing to criticize China's domestic violations of human rights, but are also unwilling to oppose China's foreign policy. Such a scenario has already occurred in the European Union (EU). In 2017, the EU failed to pass a joint condemnation of China's human rights situation due to a veto from Greece, which received a mass influx of Chinese investment into its Port of Piraeus.<sup>36</sup> But Trump seems to have turned a blind eye to the effects of the Belt and Road Initiative's sharp power, concerned only with how the Belt and Road Initiative is "insulting" and may interfere with global trade. He is unconcerned with the conflict of values between democracy and autocracy, as can be seen with the current U.S.-China trade war, a dispute of interests instead of values, and unrelated to democracy. Although Trump attempted to prevent Italy from participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative, he was concerned only over Italy's symbolic significance as a member of the Group of Seven. He also attempted to unite the members of the "Five Eyes Alliance," four members of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, and traditional European allies to form an information security front against China for the purpose of banning Chinese telecommunications companies such as Huawei and ZTE from participating in U.S. communications infrastructure projects. These measures seemed to be an attempt at forming a policy of technological "containment" by democratic states against autocratic states, but American

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<sup>36</sup> Fontaine and Kliman, "On China's New Silk Road, Democracy Pays A Toll."

allies have been unwilling to fully cooperate due to their own economic interests and market factors, and even the members of the “Five Eyes Alliance” have been unwilling to completely boycott Huawei. However, more importantly, Trump’s true intention in establishing an information security front is to safeguard national interests such as national security and technological competitiveness. This explains why the United States expanded the Clean Network program in August 2020, and wanted to ban Chinese apps deemed a threat to U.S. national security such as TikTok and WeChat.

China’s Belt and Road Initiative is far more threatening than the Soviet communist revolutions of the past. Moreover, China is now part of the world economy, and it is difficult to separate China from it, much less contain China. In other words, as the main rival to democratic states, China is far trickier to handle than the Soviet Union. Although the National Endowment for Democracy has called on the world to face the threat of China’s sharp power, the extent to which it can represent Trump’s intentions is a problem. The United States is still China’s most powerful opponent, but democratic values are not a priority for Trump, who instead places greater value on economic security, having once publicly emphasized that economic security is national security.<sup>37</sup> Pompeo’s “Communist China and the Free World’s Future” speech in July 2020 marked a significant turning point, as he emphasized that the United States must deal with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on the basis of “distrust and verify,” and called upon the free world to “change the CCP, otherwise it will surely change us.”<sup>38</sup> After that, the U.S. Department of State recognized Confucius Institutes as foreign missions of the People’s Republic of China, indicating that the United States officially regards Confucius Institutes as propaganda tools owned and controlled by the Chinese government. These changes can be considered

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<sup>37</sup> Donald Trump, “Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit | Da Nang, Vietnam,” The White House, November 10, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam/>.

<sup>38</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, “Communist China and the Free World’s Future,” U.S. Department of State, July 23, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future/>.

significant measures against China's sharp power, but the *United States Strategic Approach to The People's Republic of China* foreign policy document presented to Congress by the White House in May 2020 indicated that the competition between the United States and China will not inevitably lead to conflict. The United States does not seek to contain China, nor does it wish to disengage from the Chinese people.<sup>39</sup> These seemingly contradictory policy statements may be a two-pronged strategy against China, or one of Trump's campaign strategies in response to the presidential election.

In light of the high uncertainty in Trump's past policies, it is clear that the United States must provide more guarantees to its allies if it is to call for a "Coalition against Chinese Sharp Power". In addition, after the presidential election at the end of 2020, the new U.S. President's China policy will still be an important indicator for determining whether the United States intends to contain China. Thus, China's sharp power is tied to the survival of democratic values, but it will not be easy to return to a policy of ideological "containment" in its defense.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

China's sharp power is a mixed security threat. According to the characteristics of its means, China's sharp power is a new type of non-traditional security threat, but according to the object it intends to affect, the security threat of China's sharp power is no different from that of traditional security. The main objective for which China wields sharp power is to seek its own political and economic interests. Its means include infiltrating and subverting the target country, enhancing its own positive image, and forcing others to engage in self-censorship to silence unflattering commentary against China.

In the broadest sense, China's sharp power can be regarded as a kind of soft power with the coercive characteristic of hard power, but

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<sup>39</sup> National Security Council, *United States Strategic Approach to The People's Republic of China*, The White House, May 20, 2020, p. 1, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/U.S.-Strategic-Approach-to-The-Peoples-Republic-of-China-Report-5.24v1.pdf>.

packaged within the camouflage of soft power. There is actually only a fine line between China's soft power and sharp power. Once it crosses the red lines of truthfulness, openness, and coercion, China's hidden coercive intentions will be revealed, and its soft power will transform into sharp power. To a certain extent, both sharp power and soft power are tools, but while soft power can be either benign or malicious, sharp power is vicious and deceptive. If China's sharp power becomes a recognized standard for defining the export of ideological influence from autocracies hereafter, or arouses a sense of crisis within democracies that aligns them collectively against China, then China's sharp power may cause a paradigm shift.

Great power politics and trap effects define the dynamics of China's sharp power. Among the autocracies that export sharp power, China's ambitions and its challenge to the United States are even more threatening than Russia's. Thus, the concept of sharp power as proposed by the National Endowment for Democracy can be said to be tailored for the rise of China. The traps of empire also directly or indirectly drive China's sharp power. For example, China cannot avoid the "James Dean trap," is eager to gain the recognition of other countries, and even hopes to gain the power to direct discourse. Hence, China wields its self-conceived soft power to silence criticism abroad, and imposes its own wishes or values around the world, but Western society regards it as the output of ideological sharp power due to China's totalitarian regime. Although China believes that its Belt and Road Initiative avoids the "Thucydides trap," Trump believes in turn that it is "insulting" and may interfere with global trade. In other words, it seems that China and the United States cannot avoid the "Thucydides trap." It is not surprising that the Belt and Road Initiative is labeled as sharp power, and scholars have already pointed out that China has exported autocracy to undermine democracy through the Belt and Road Initiative. China believes that it has avoided the "Kindleberger trap" and provided public goods for the world with the Belt and Road Initiative. However, China often uses this initiative to construct infrastructure that does not meet the needs of host countries, causing them to be saddled with a large amount of debt to China and be beholden to it. This is tantamount to deceptive behavior. In order to silence criticism of debt trap diplomacy,

China continues to push the Belt and Road Initiative to mask such policies. Thus, to a certain extent, the “Kindleberger trap” has indirectly driven China into wielding sharp power.

China's sharp power is a “new term” that describes an “old threat.” Similar means were used during the Cold War. From the perspective of Beijing, the use of soft power by democracies to promote democratization may be the real “sharp power,” as soft power may compromise its governance and pierce its authoritarian system. From this perspective, both soft power and sharp power are tools in essence, and the crux behind both is actually a conflict of values between democracy and autocracy. The National Endowment for Democracy's proposal of the concept of sharp power is tantamount to throwing down the gauntlet to China. However, democratic values are not a priority for Trump. Establishing an information security front against China may resemble a policy of technological “containment,” but Trump is actually prioritizing national interests such as national security and technological competitiveness. Further verification is necessary to determine whether there will be a struggle between democratic and autocratic values, as the Trump administration's hardline attitude toward China may be a strategy in response to the presidential election. In light of the high uncertainty in Trump's past policies, it is clear that the United States must provide more guarantees to its allies if it is to call for a “Coalition against Chinese Sharp Power.” After the presidential election at the end of 2020, the new U.S. President's China policy will still be an important indicator for determining whether the United States intends to contain China. Hence, China's sharp power is tied to the survival of democratic values, but it will not be easy to return to a policy of ideological “containment” again.

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### Newsletter

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