

A Theoretical Framework and Constructed Model for Sharp Power

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Abstract

In 2017, the National Endowment for Democracy released a report discussing the influence operations used by both China and Russia in Eastern Europe and South America respectively. This report popularized the term “sharp power” in the International Relations field. So far, the research on sharp power revolves around the defining characteristics of sharp power, the effects of sharp power influence operations, and how those influence operations are conducted. Sharp power is a new phenomenon, and there is little research on fleshing out a broad theoretical framework for analyzing how states engage in sharp power operations. To fill this gap in the literature, I will first synthesize and review the current academic literature on sharp power. Then I will classify sharp power through three tenets: the corrosion of the legitimacy of foreign institutions, the manipulation of public perceptions, and the pressure on individual actors by the host state. Next, I will justify my methodological choices and develop a theoretical framework for analyzing how states use sharp power. Afterward, I will conduct case studies on the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation to analyze how both countries use sharp power to corrode the legitimacy of institutions, manipulate public perceptions, and apply pressure on individual actors. Lastly, I will conclude with a discussion of the potential implications of the paper and highlight avenues for further research.

Keywords

Sharp Power, International Relations, Influence Operations, China, Russia

1. Introduction

In 2017, the National Endowment for Democracy released a report documenting a foreign policy strategy that is neither hard power nor soft power (Walker et al.,

2017: p. 6). This strategy of “sharp power” is not openly coercive resembling hard power. However, this sharp power also does not seek to gain or exercise influence through improving reputation, persuasion, and/or appeal. Sharp power “pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted states” (Walker et al., 2017: p. 6). More specifically, sharp power actions may seek to devalue or damage the legitimacy and integrity of the independent institutions of a target state. Sharp power also seeks to delegitimize the institutions, political system, or regime type of the host state. States such as China and Russia both engage in a “charm offensive” not through charming or fostering goodwill, but via sharp power, or the manipulation of a target state’s political, media, academic, and economic spheres. The National Endowment for Democracy also identifies an asymmetry of openness between democratic and authoritarian societies, which allows authoritarian powers to garner a greater degree of influence in democratic societies while muting the influence of democratic societies domestically (Walker et al., 2017: p. 9). Sharp power can dangerously amplify social divisions in target states, destroy trust in institutions, and increase the appeal of authoritarian rhetoric. Although previous literature on sharp power has been invaluable in bringing sharp power into the academic discourse and increasing awareness surrounding sharp power operations, there is little work on creating a generalizable framework pertaining to when and how states use sharp power. Although there is not a clear consensus on what constitutes sharp power, this strategy should be understood in three contexts: the compromising of the legitimacy of foreign institutions, the manipulation of public perceptions in favor of the host country, and the pressuring of political and economic actors in a target state. Within these three contexts, the use of sharp power does not directly coerce through hard power, nor does it seek to attract and co-opt the interests of other states through soft power.

In this paper, I will begin with a synthesis and critical evaluation of the literature on sharp power. I will analyze how academics have defined sharp power, distinguished the characteristics between soft, sharp, and hard power, evaluated the connection between sharp power and authoritarianism, and highlighted the key components of sharp power. Next, I will lay out and justify my research methods. Third, I will develop a broader theory analyzing what sharp power is, what environments sharp power operates in, and how sharp power corrodes democratic institutions. In the next part of the paper, I will use China and Russia to test this theory. Lastly, I will summarize my findings, discuss the potential implications, and point out avenues for further research.

2. Literature Review

In 1990, Joseph Nye coined the term soft power to describe “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcome one wants through attraction” (Nye, 2008: p. 94). While soft power principally focused on attraction, hard power, as Joseph Nye defined it, was “the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military

might to make others follow your will” (Nye, 2003). Both soft and hard power are used to obtain a desired outcome. However, the distinguishing trait between soft and hard power is the means to a desired outcome. Soft power deals with attraction to obtain such an outcome, whereas hard power uses coercion to obtain a desired outcome. The tools of soft power would therefore be tools that generate attraction such as political ideology, public diplomacy, and/or policies that are viewed as being legitimate by other international actors (Nye, 2008). Conversely, hard power tools are usually associated with military threats or economic inducements (Gray, 2011: p. 18).

In 2017, the National Endowment for Democracy pointed out a new power dynamic that had neither of the characteristics of soft or hard power. Jessica Ludwig and Christopher Walker argue that sharp power “is not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centers on distraction and manipulation” (Walker et al., 2017: p. 10). However, many scholars disagree with the use of the term sharp power as a concept independent of both soft and hard power. Some scholars such as Joseph Nye argue that sharp power is another form of hard power based on the coercive nature of sharp power (Nye, 2018b). To Joseph Nye, “the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes” is a form of hard power (Nye, 2018b). In response to the categorization of sharp power as another form of hard power, Yenna Wu (2019) acknowledges that sharp power can be understood to be a part of hard power in the sense that sharp power actions can be backed by hard power (p. 133). She then argues that sharp power actions “are not the same as traditional hard power, which refers to the direct and open use of military or economic force to coerce another nation” (Wu, 2019: p. 133). Regardless of the intent of soft power, soft power uses attraction and persuasion to achieve an outcome. Similarly, regardless of intent, hard power uses outward coercion to achieve a desired outcome. Sharp power does not achieve goals through attraction, and Yenna Wu importantly identifies the lack of coercion in the traditionally-held sense of directly using military or economic force within sharp power. Sharp power, instead, seeks to achieve its ends through a more covert form of manipulation of information environments and gaining internal political leverage. In a sense, sharp power seeks to infiltrate rather than attract or outwardly coerce. Dr. Xin Liu (2018) outright rejects the sharp power as a different concept altogether. She identifies sharp power as being an unskilled combination of soft and hard power. Just as Joseph Nye (2008) defines smart power as a skilled combination of soft and hard power, Xin Liu (2018) views sharp power as unsmart power or an unskilled combination of soft and hard power. In her mind, there is no new concept of sharp power.

Researchers also have different classifications of sharp power. Christopher Walker highlights the “CAMP” (cultural, academic, media, and publishing) sectors in democracies as being channels of sharp power, as they “are open and accessible” in democratic societies (Walker, 2018: p. 13). These categories mostly deal with public opinion while missing the political and/or economic impacts of

sharp power. Paolo Messa partially rectifies this issue by expanding the purview of sharp power. He categorizes the levers of sharp power in four different arenas: institutions designed to channel public opinion, politics, economics, and cyber (Messa, 2019: p. 32). Under Paolo Messa's framework, academia, media, publishing, and culture would all fall under the camp of institutions designed to channel public opinion. Unlike Christopher Walker and Paolo Messa, Elina Melin categorizes sharp power not through the channels of sharp power influence, but through the tools of sharp power. She categorizes sharp power in terms of manipulation, censorship, propaganda, control, and influence (Melin, 2021: p. 37).

Some scholars argue, or at least imply that sharp power may not be inherently tied to democracy. After all, Joseph Nye points out that "the United States and the Soviet Union resorted to such methods during the Cold War" (Nye, 2018a). By pointing out the United States and the Soviet Union as both being perpetrators of sharp power, Joseph Nye highlights how the use of sharp power may not necessarily be linked to the political ideology of a nation. However, it is still important to answer why some scholars argue authoritarian states use sharp power more often than democratic states. There seem to be two categories of arguments made by scholars to answer why authoritarian states use sharp power more than democratic states. On one hand, Yenna Wu (2019) posits that "democratic governments value freedom, human rights, accountability and rule of law" as an explanation (p. 134). This argument relies on the assumption that liberal democratic states externalize many of their democratic domestic norms to the international sphere, which in turn causes democratic states to engage in sharp power operations less frequently than authoritarian states. I will call this the "normative" explanation. Other scholars such as Łukasz Skoneczny, Bogusław Cacko, and Paolo Messa argue that the explanations for why democratic states may use sharp power less often than an authoritarian state lies in the institutional constraints of democratic states. Łukasz Skoneczny and Bogusław Cacko argue that democratic states contain certain freedoms and oversight from independent institutions that autocratic states don't have, limiting the opportunity for democratic states to engage in sharp power operations to the same degree authoritarian states do (Skoneczny & Cacko, 2021: p. 329). Paolo Messa empirically highlights this argument when he points out David Barstow's investigative journalism that exposed a program by the Department of Defense to train military analysts, lobbyists, and former officers to present themselves as independent analysts praising the 2003 US war in Iraq. Paolo Messa further elaborates that "[n]ot all states would permit an investigative journalist to publish government documents and criticize the leaders of the executive and the army" (Messa, 2019: p. 24). I will label this the "institutionalist" explanation for why liberal democratic states may engage in fewer sharp power operations compared to authoritarian states. This argument first assumes that a liberal democratic state's open features such as "freedom of speech, free media market, political pluralism,

meaning the possibility of establishing political parties, not under the influence of authorities, the existence of an independent sector of non-governmental organizations, etc.” provide greater oversight over government institutions (Skoneczny & Cacko, 2021: p. 329). The second premise of the institutionalist argument is that authoritarian states do not have the same degree of oversight for governing institutions compared to liberal democratic states. Third, states with greater oversight over their governing institutions have fewer opportunities to engage in sharp power operations. It would then follow that liberal democracies engage in sharp power operations less frequently than authoritarian states. Unlike the normative explanation, the institutionalist explanation relies on the institutional constraints of democratic states to explain why they engage in fewer sharp power operations compared to authoritarian states.

Many scholars have tried to define sharp power, highlight where democratic states are particularly vulnerable to sharp power, and explain how political identity may factor into the use of sharp power. Scholars have classified sharp power in terms of its characteristics or its mediums. However, there is little research examining where sharp power is situated within the broader grand strategy of a nation. Therefore, I categorize sharp power in terms of its objectives against a target state to better contextualize sharp power within the broader scope of the host nation’s clandestine and influence operations.

3. Methodologies

The aims of this paper are twofold. In the first section, I will develop a theory of sharp power by highlighting the broader objectives of sharp power operations. Afterward, I will highlight the workings of sharp power in China and Russia. This paper is a qualitative analysis of sharp power, relies on interpretations of already existing definitions of sharp power, and explains how sharp power manifests itself in Russia and China. I rely on many secondary definitions and categorizations of sharp power to develop my theory of sharp power, and I draw on both primary and secondary sources to demonstrate my theory of sharp power in empirical arguments. Throughout the rest of the methodology section, I will justify my methodological choices, operationalize my variables, and lay out how I will structure the case studies.

3.1. Categorization of Sharp Power

This paper conceptualizes sharp power through three categories that draw on previous research from Paolo Messa, Jessica Ludwig, Christopher Walker, Łukasz Skoneczny, and Bogusław Cacko. I chose to base my theoretical framework on the goals of sharp power, as this classification has more predictive value than classifying sharp power based on its tools or classifying sharp power based on the arenas that channel sharp power. Categorizing sharp power based on its goals allows us to better predict future environments where sharp power festers and helps us identify how sharp power might change to achieve the goals of co-

vertly corroding the legitimacy of institutions, manipulating public perceptions in favor of the host state, and pressuring political and economic actors in a target state.

3.2. Case Study Selection

This study uses Russia and China as case studies. Russia and China are used as they are some of the largest employers of sharp power. There also already exists comprehensive literature on influence operations by Russia and China compared to states such as the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Saudi Arabia, or the United States that do not have as much data. This allows me to access a larger literature base pertaining to my theory of sharp power. Furthermore, states are the chosen case study focus in order to better contextualize sharp power within a state's broader foreign policy agenda. Although the United States has been the world's largest military and economic power for the past three decades, the instances in which the United States has used sharp power to influence another state have been limited and short-lived. Oftentimes, the open nature of the United States political system prevents officials from implementing their sharp power operations. Therefore, there is simply not enough data on the United States for a case study analyzing the use of sharp power by the United States compared to that of China and Russia. Similarly, there is simply not enough data to include Saudi Arabia, Iran, or the United Arab Emirates as case studies.

3.3. Operationalization

Similar to Jessica Ludwig and Christopher Walker's characterization of sharp power, I operationalize sharp power as actions taken by states to distract or manipulate populations or institutions for power. The classification of sharp power I use to form the foundation of my empirical analysis is the attempted corrosion of institutions, the manipulation of public perceptions to view the host state in a positive light, and the pressuring of key economic and political decision-makers. Another common characterization I use is "host" and "target" state. The host state engages in sharp power operations, whereas the target state is the victim of sharp power operations by host states.

4. Theoretical Framework

Sharp power has three tenets: the corrosion of the legitimacy of institutions, the manipulation of public opinion to strengthen the image of the host state, and the pressuring of political and economic actors in a state. Sharp power tools can fall into any or all of these categories, and any foreign policy tools that achieve these ends covertly should be considered sharp power. Similar to soft power, sharp power entails a degree of subtlety. However, unlike soft power, states use sharp power to achieve their ends through manipulation and distraction rather than attraction (Walker et al., 2017: p. 10).

An important step to clarify is the normativity of sharp power. Akin to both

soft and hard power, sharp power is not a normative concept. Sharp power, like any form of power, is a tool that can be used positively and negatively. Sharp power can be used to spark democratic protests in an authoritarian state, or it can be a tool used to suppress research in academia. In both scenarios, the morality of sharp power is determined by the intentions and/or actions of its wielder.

Sharp power also operates by disguising itself as soft power. Simply sponsoring media outlets and hosting cultural institutes are both initially soft power operations. However, as soon as the media outlets sacrifice journalistic integrity, and as soon as cultural institutes are being leveraged to shut down speakers at universities, soft power becomes sharp.

4.1. Sharp, Soft, and Hard Power

In order to conceptualize sharp power, it must be distinguished from soft and hard power. Soft power is explicitly devoid of coercion and is the ability to shape long-term attitudes and preferences through attraction. Institutions of civil societies such as universities, churches, companies, and think tanks, for example, all work to increase the attraction of Washington as a partner on the international stage. Moreover, cultures, values, and ideals can also work to generate soft power and increase the attractiveness of a state as a partner internationally. These methods of projecting soft power are all ways in which states shape long-term attitudes and preferences about themselves on the world stage.

Hard power can be viewed as the direct coercion from states onto other states. Hard power is generally associated with military force or economic inducements as methods of coercion. Projecting hard power militarily can range from winning a conventional war to sending naval vessels for Freedom of Navigation operations. Economically, hard power can range from economic sanctions to foreign aid. Although foreign aid can be used as soft power to create affinity or improve the image of a state, it can also be used as hard power to directly coerce states to behave according to the desires of the donor state. These tools of hard power are used to directly coerce states to achieve particular objectives and exert influence.

Sharp power falls into neither category. Sharp power does not seek to principally shape long-term attitudes or preferences through attraction. On the other hand, sharp power lacks the common directly coercive characteristics of hard power such as the ability to coerce economically and militarily. Instead, sharp power seeks to covertly and subtly decrease the attraction of other states by delegitimizing the institutions of other states, manipulating public opinion through propaganda, and implicitly pressuring economic and political actors within another state. Throughout the remaining portion of the theoretical framework, I will elaborate and expand upon the aforementioned components of sharp power.

4.2. Corrosion of Institutions

One of the paramount components of sharp power is the subtle corrosion of

both independent and government institutions of the target state. This corrosion is often achieved through the host state sponsoring divisive media outlets and disinformation campaigns. Russia, for example, simultaneously sponsors disinformation campaigns intended to undermine COVID-19 vaccinations in the US while promoting other far-left outlets such as Maffick Media and Redfish (Kirk, 2019; Dilanian & Ramgopal, 2020). Russia's support for these outlets isn't based on anti-vaccination or left-wing principles. Rather, Russia backs these organizations that maintain an "anti-establishment narrative" to fuel populist sentiment and undermine trust in western experts and institutions. The exacerbation of distrust in western institutions is similarly felt in Poland. Jacek Kucharczyk (Walker et al., 2017) rightly identifies that the ultimate aim of Russian propaganda in Poland is "to undermine the key goals of Poland's foreign policy and Poles' self-identification with Western values and institutions" (p. 102). The purposes of sponsoring disinformation campaigns, divisive media outlets, and promoting propaganda are to undermine the perceptions of these institutions by the citizens of a target state; all of these sharp power operations do not coerce in the traditional sense of leveraging military or economic power, nor do they attempt to win hearts and minds. This phenomenon is based on manipulation and distraction. More often than not, sharp power amplifies existing divisions between states, people, and institutions.

4.3. Manipulation of Public Opinion

Another key component of sharp power is the manipulation of public opinion in a target state to strengthen the host state's image. This more subtle approach to sharp power deals with state-sponsored campaigns to censor speech that damages the reputation of the host state and/or promote propaganda for the sake of bettering the reputation of the host state. This strategy of attempting to win over public opinion often manifests in think tanks, media outlets, and academia. For example, the Lithuanian government accused Xiaomi, a Chinese-based company, of selling phones that were pre-programmed to censor 449 words such as "free Tibet", "democracy movement" and "Long live Taiwan Independence" in 2021 (Sytas, 2021). This foreign and subtle censorship is designed to create a narrative that strengthens China's national security interests by censoring political narratives that contradict China's national security goals or harm China's image.

4.4. Pressure on Economic and Political Actors

Lastly, sharp power operations apply pressure on individuals to achieve desired outcomes. This can be done through economic channels such as foreign investments or political channels such as embassies. To better contextualize this pressure, Professor Yoav Ariel at the University of Tel Aviv ordered the shutdown of a Falun Gong exhibition per the request of the Chinese embassy in 2008 (Edelman, 2008). Similarly, North Carolina State canceled a planned event with

the Dalai Lama after the Confucius Institute in the university warned that such a visit could harm the “strong relationships” that they were developing with China (Epstein, 2018). These incidents indicate potential channels in which China used political pressure to influence independent actors to control the information environment in line with Chinese domestic policy and national security goals.

Sharp power should be viewed as a phenomenon independent of soft and hard power. Sharp, soft, and hard power are not mutually exclusive policies. A nation can levy all three mechanisms of power simultaneously to achieve a desired outcome. Sharp power is not mutually exclusive with hard or soft power. The three objectives of sharp power are to corrode the legitimacy of institutions, strengthen the image of the host state through manipulation, and apply pressure on independent actors within a nation. Any specific sharp power operation can fall into any number of the above categories.

5. Case Studies

In this section, I will conduct case studies using China and Russia, I will explain how both countries use sharp power, and provide individual examples of how these countries use sharp power. Each state will have an introduction; a section focused on how the state corrodes institutions within a target state, manipulates perceptions in favor of the host state, and applies pressure on individuals. Lastly, I will provide a conclusion summarizing the findings of each case study.

5.1. The People’s Republic of China

In 2013 Xi Jin Ping took the Presidency of the People’s Republic of China. After taking the Presidency, he proclaimed the “Chinese Dream.” This Chinese Dream, according to the National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China, seeks to achieve a “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (The National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China). The China Daily frames the Chinese Dream and the rejuvenation of the People’s Republic of China as a fundamentally soft power pursuit of sustained economic development, elevating the perception of “Brand China,” and infusing cultural values to “balance materialism” (China Daily USA, 2014). However, one weapon the People’s Republic of China uses to further its “Chinese Dream” alongside soft power, is sharp power. China uses subtle and covert forms of coercion or manipulations to corrode the legitimacy of foreign institutions by compromising the integrity of foreign institutions, strengthening the image and elevating the perception of “Brand China” and applying pressure to key economic and political decision-makers in foreign countries.

5.1.1. Compromising the Legitimacy of Foreign Institutions

Oftentimes the corrosion of institutions occurs by destroying the credibility of an institution by compromising its integrity. Although Confucius Institutes are closing down, one example was the embedding of Confucius Institutes into academic western academic settings. The People’s Daily frames the purpose of

Confucius Institutes as fundamentally a soft power operation “to help people in the rest of the world learn the Chinese language, to know more about the Chinese culture and to enhance mutual understanding and friendship” while labeling the critics of Confucius Institutes as people who “more often than not people who have a deep bias against China” (People’s Daily Online, 2014). The Confucius Institutes are disguised as a soft power operation. However, given their characteristics and goals, they are tools of sharp power. Christopher Walker (2018) notes that Confucius Institutes “employ staffers who at times have sought to block host universities from holding discussions on sensitive topics such as Taiwan or Tibet” (p. 13). By embedding an institution that hires staffers who attempt to block universities from hosting speakers that dissent from the People’s Republic of China’s narrative, the Confucius Institutes compromised the intellectual freedom of American universities.

Another example of this is in 2017 when the University of California San Diego hosted the Dalai Lama as that year’s commencement speaker. This sparked outrage among the Chinese Students and Scholars Association which claimed to have contacted the Chinese Consulate for guidance (Redden, 2017a). In response to this incident, the China Scholarship Council, a non-profit affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education, froze state funding for Chinese students seeking to study at the University of California San Diego, which highlights the pressures by the People’s Republic of China to suppress viewpoints not in line with the People’s Republic of China’s agenda (Redden, 2017b). While the Chinese Students and Scholars Association were unsuccessful in blocking the Dalai Lama from speaking, this attempt is an indication of the People’s Republic of China’s ability and willingness to influence the independence of a United States academic institution.

5.1.2. Manipulating the Image of “Brand China”

Another component of sharp power is the manipulation of public perceptions in favor of the host country, a strategy that the People’s Republic of China frequently uses. One example of manipulating public perception that China uses is its vast propaganda network across the globe. Again, maintaining state-backed news networks in foreign countries is not inherently damaging or an example of sharp power. In fact, having credible state-backed news networks operating in foreign countries such as Al-Jazeera, Voice of America, and the British Broadcasting Corporation can all work as soft power instruments to shape the host nation’s public perception. However, these initial soft power activities transform into sharp power operations when media becomes propaganda, where the media outlet sacrifices journalistic integrities for the sake of advancing a political agenda. Paolo Messa (2019) rightly highlights that these outlets “do not suffer surgical censure of their content and tight control by the government over their journalistic work” (p. 41).

This distinction between state-backed media outlets as opposed to propaganda outlets can be identified when analyzing the practices of Chinese state-controlled

outlets such as the People's Daily and CCTV. Xi Jinping made explicit the intent of Chinese publications when he declared, "All the work by the party's media must reflect the party's will, safeguard the party's authority, and safeguard the party's unity" (Guardian, 2016). Furthermore, Xu and Albert point out how Chinese media outlets will often "employ their own monitors to ensure political acceptability of their content" (Xu & Albert, 2017). These practices of censorship all seek to advance a party agenda without, at the very least, regard for independent journalism. By manipulating the information environment with state-backed propaganda networks, the People's Republic of China further advances its strategy of increasing its public perceptions in a target country. Bailard (2016) argues, "In many cases [across Africa], the larger the Chinese media presence in a country and the more access to relevant media technology, the more favorable public opinion toward China has grown across multiple dimensions". Despite the lack of journalistic integrity of Chinese state-backed publications, these publications have had an effect favoring China in terms of public opinion in many African countries, which suggests a degree of effectiveness in furthering China's goal of strengthening and legitimizing its image through a comprehensive and manipulative propaganda network.

5.1.3. Pressure on Key Economic and Political Decision-Makers in Foreign Countries

Perhaps China's most egregious display of sharp power is in its efforts to influence individual decision-makers in a nation. Sharp power's third tenet of pressuring individual decision-makers in a country is best demonstrated in their manipulation of Australian politics. What made Australia particularly vulnerable to Chinese influence is its allowance of foreign campaign contributions (Sawer, 2021). Amy Searight (2020) rightly points out that this creates "a wide-open loophole for wealthy Chinese political benefactors with links to the CCP to inject large amounts of money into political campaigns". Between 2000 and 2017, nearly 80% of foreign donations to Australia were connected to China, which has contributed to the undermining of Australia's internal democratic governance (Gomes, 2017). For example, the New South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption

ICAC found that Ernest Wong planned to circumvent an election finance law that required him to disclose his political donations to the New South Wales Electoral Commission, and schemed to procure a false testimony out of a witness about whether or not the witness donated in connection with a Chinese Friends of Labor fundraising event (Independent Commission against Corruption, 2022). The ICAC found that the source of an illegal \$100,000 donation to Ernest Wong was Chinese billionaire Huang Xiangmo (Independent Commission against Corruption, 2022). In this situation, a Chinese Communist Party-affiliated individual making illegal campaign contributions as a mechanism to pressure an elected official in a foreign country exemplifies one facet of Chinese sharp power acting to pressure political decision-makers. Again, while this cor-

ruption scandal was uncovered, the People's Republic of China, nonetheless attempted to undermine the sovereignty of a foreign nation by applying pressure to a policymaker, a form of sharp power.

5.1.4. Chinese Sharp Power

China has a wide range of sharp power tools at its disposal. One of their biggest targets when compromising foreign institutions is academia. By mobilizing a domestic base of Chinese students or using their cultural institutes to block discussions on topics sensitive to the People's Republic of China, they are compromising the intellectual integrity and freedom of academic spaces. The People's Republic of China's vast propaganda network from CCTV to the People's Daily all, self-admittedly, exists to advance the Chinese Communist Party's agenda. By principally focusing on advancing a particular nation's agenda, these outlets manipulate the information environment in favor of these environments. Most egregiously, the People's Republic of China has attempted to pressure or entice elected officials. This can happen through either illegal or legal foreign contributions by state actors. All of these actions entail a degree of subtlety. They are not overt like hard power in the traditional sense, yet they are also not principally based on attraction. Sharp power operations can fit into one or multiple of these categories, and they often do.

5.2. Russia

Russia is perhaps the most egregious user of sharp power. From election meddling to state-sponsored propaganda campaigns, the Russian government is the boldest user of sharp power. Unlike China, Russia has also coordinated the use of sharp and hard power during the war between Russia and Ukraine that began in 2022. Similar to China, Russia's election meddling, propaganda network, and support of far-right parties in Europe corrode institutions, manipulate public opinion, and pressure public officials.

5.2.1. Compromising the Legitimacy of Foreign Institutions

In 2016, Russia attempted to corrode US elections by launching multiple influence operations intended to sway the election in favor of Donald Trump. Volume 5 of the Select Committee on Intelligence report on Russian influence operations during the 2016 election found that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a cyber operation to gain access to and leak information that may damage Hillary Clinton's bid for the US presidency ([U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2020b, Volume: 5, p. vii](#)). Furthermore, a National Security Agency report found that Russian intelligence engaged in cyber operations to gain intel on "election-related software and hardware solutions" to create a voter-registration spear phishing campaign "targeting U.S. local government organizations" ([National Security Agency, 2017: p. 1](#)). The committee further indicates it has "found ample evidence to suggest that the Russian government was developing and implementing capabilities to interfere in the 2016 elections,

including undermining confidence in U.S. democratic institutions and voting processes” (U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2020a, Volume: 1, p. 5). Russia’s cyber operations and a plethora of intelligence reports have made Russian attempts to influence and undermine US democratic institutions abundantly clear. Russia’s interference in the 2016 election is a prime example of how Russia uses sharp power to subtly corrode institutions by undermining the integrity and sapping confidence in the US electoral institutions.

5.2.2. Compromising the Legitimacy of Foreign Institutions

Another form of Russian sharp power operations is its attempts to sway public opinion using manipulation through a vast propaganda network. Similar to China, Russia’s propaganda network seeks to advance an agenda despite commonly accepted standards of journalistic ethics and integrity. Christopher Paul and Mirriam Matthews rightly identify two distinct features of Russian propaganda: “high numbers of channels and messages and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions” (Paul & Matthews, 2016: p. 1). Russia simultaneously disseminates false information on vaccination in general while also backing far-left media channels such as Redfish and Soapbox (Broniatowski et al., 2018; Dilanian & Ramgopal, 2020). These Russian propaganda campaigns are not based on any principle support for the far-left or anti-vaccination, but on fueling both right-wing and left-wing populism. Russia supports any “anti-establishment” narratives, whether left or right, designed to undermine faith in western institutions and experts, thereby making Russia seem comparatively more appealing to a larger audience. By framing themselves as a counterweight or alternative to western “establishment” narratives, they can appeal to an even larger audience of people disillusioned with western states or societies. The 2022 Russia-Ukraine war is also a prime example of how Russia mixes hard and sharp power to increase its public perception. Russia’s accusation of Ukraine using chemical and biological weapons has been echoed by elements of the US right-wing and other conspiracy theorists (Chappell, 2022). In this situation, Russia leveraged its public diplomacy to fuel misinformation, potentially undermining the support of Ukraine by people in western countries, indirectly helping Russia’s war effort. This specific activity doubles as helping both Russia’s hard power efforts in Ukraine and sharp power efforts in the US by strengthening the public perception of Russia in the US.

5.2.3. Pressure on Key Economic and Political Decision-Makers in Foreign Countries

Lastly, Russia’s presence among European far-right politicians allows Russia to influence and pressure politicians. One example is the French National Front receiving a €40 million loan from a bank with links to the Russian government to partly cover campaign expenses for the 2017 French national election (Beitâne, 2015). Beatrix Futàk-Campbell (2020) rightly recognizes that “by providing financial assistance to [far-right populist] parties, Russia helps to keep

them close to mainstream politics both domestically and on the EU level” (p. 35). In turn, these parties have been challenging and at times even driving politics in their respective countries”. BuzzFeed News also obtained an audio recording in 2019 between an aide of former Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini and three other Russians to discuss a potential deal to funnel \$65 million to Italy’s far-right Lega Party (Nardelli, 2019). Weiss (2020) notes how “statements from Lega and FPÖ on Europe, NATO, and the West often align with Putin’s aspirations—demonization of Brussels and an end to sanctions”. Similar to how China provided financial support to pro-Beijing voices in the Australian parliament, Russian financial assistance also acts as a tool to pressure or co-opt elected officials or people in politics to achieve policy outcomes in favor of the Kremlin.

5.2.4. Russian Sharp Power

Russian sharp power operations are much more open and less subtle than Chinese sharp power operations. Their cyber operations in 2016 to a degree compromised, or at the very least, attempted to compromise the United States 2016 election. Their propaganda network pushes rhetoric dedicated to undermining western institutions rather than attempting to discern any “truth” and their financial assistance to European far-right parties and political organizations pressures and entices public officials to be more sympathetic to Russian interests.

6. Conclusion

Sharp power is an emerging and subtle danger that policymakers and citizens should be aware of. Today, there is either little research dedicated to developing a theoretical framework of sharp power or the current categorizations of sharp power do not adequately capture the nature of sharp power. In this paper, I develop a theoretical framework to conceptualize sharp power. This framework focuses on three aspects: the corrosion of institutions, the manipulation of public perceptions in favor of the host country, and the pressure applied on individuals. Rather than focusing on the innate characteristics of sharp power or the arena in which host states engage in sharp power operations, I emphasize the objectives of sharp power as a medium of categorization. I identified these categories to be intrinsic to sharp power rather than possible tools of sharp power or the arena in which states engage in sharp power operations. I chose Russia and China as case studies because I found them to be the largest, most obvious, and most pervasive perpetrators of sharp power. These case studies highlight particular examples of sharp power and how they fit into my model of sharp power.

When states wield sharp power, they corrode the legitimacy and integrity of institutions, manipulate public perceptions, and pressure or entice foreign public officials. Sharp power tools can be anything from perpetuating propaganda for a state to financing public officials beneficial to the host country. China and Russia are some of the largest perpetrators of sharp power, from propaganda networks to financing public officials favorable to the host nation, their influence in Eu-

rope, the Americas, and Asia is pervasive.

Sharp power is a pervasive and invisible threat that permeates all levels of society from popular culture to government institutions. Not recognizing sharp power creates “a dangerous complacency, allowing the authoritarians, through trial and error, to refine their existing efforts and develop a much more powerful array of influence techniques suitable for a modern environment” (Messa, 2019: p. 25). Increasing awareness of the policies of hostile states and monitoring those policies are productive actions that can counteract the effects of sharp power.

Further avenues of research could be applying the theoretical framework of sharp power I laid out to conventionally democratic states. There, researchers can identify and evaluate similarities between democratic and authoritarian states when wielding sharp power. Furthermore, researchers can also test whether my theory of sharp power holds up when evaluating sharp power operations by democratic states. Another avenue of research is understanding when states choose to engage in sharp power operations. Similar to how the Bargaining Theory of War deals with when and why states go to war, researchers could construct a model or theory dealing with when states choose to use sharp power over soft power.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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