

## **How Can Taiwan and the United States Fight China's Sharp Power? From National Security to Human Security\***

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The biggest potential threat that China's sharp power brings to the world is the decline of liberal democracy and the rise of authoritarianism. This article details how China's sharp power works and discusses what liberal states can do to respond.

### **China's Sharp Power**

The functioning of China's sharp power can be summarized from the perspectives of its means and ends. In terms of its means, sharp power is distinct from soft power which operates through attraction and persuasion. Instead, it is a type of hard power that

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functions through coercion and incentive.<sup>1</sup> Examples include distorting information, spreading fake news, promoting self-censorship and reshaping public opinion with economic incentives and threats. All of these methods involve constraints on individual freedoms.

From the perspective of its ends, Beijing exerts sharp power on overseas democratic societies for the purpose of eroding people's trust in liberal democracy and constructing their identification with the effectiveness and legitimacy of authoritarianism. The overall effect is the following: China's authoritarian regime remains immune from external cultural influence due to its closeness within various "firewalls," while democratic societies are subject to the permeation of both capital and information coming from China due to their openness to the outside world. Such an asymmetric exchange between closed and open systems leads to the spillover effect of China's authoritarianism in contemporary international society.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, the freedom of individuals and communities to

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph S. Nye, "How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs* (January 24, 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-01-24/how-sharp-power-threatens-soft-power>.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "From 'Soft Power' to 'Sharp Power': Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World," in *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, ed. Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for Democracy, 2017), <https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence-forum-report/>.

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decide their way of life has been reduced and, accordingly, the basic principles of human rights and democracy are being jeopardized. China's sharp power, therefore, should not merely be considered a matter of "national security" that individual states care about in a conventional sense, but it should also be regarded as an issue of "human security"<sup>3</sup> that all the human beings should stand up to cope with together.

### **Internally, Strengthening Democracy at Home**

In order to confront China's sharp power, the United States, as the pilot of the free world, and Taiwan, as the frontline of the "new Cold War" between the United States and China, should work together to counter the external effects of Chinese authoritarianism in order to preserve their shared values and interests. Specifically, the fundamental strategy that liberal states could take to respond to China's sharp power is to manage the import and export of capital and information with China so that the current asymmetric exchange between the authoritarian and liberal systems can be reversed.

Internally, Taiwan and the United States should protect and strengthen their democratic institutions to avoid being overly impacted by China's sharp power. First, regarding **capital**

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Report 1994," United Nations Development Programme Website, 1994, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-1994>.

**imports**, Taiwan and the United States should examine Chinese investments and mergers with care, especially those suspected to cause damage to basic human rights, freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Starting in 2009, Beijing carried out an “Overseas Propaganda Plan”<sup>4</sup> which sponsored state-owned media to expand overseas, encouraged Chinese investors to purchase local media abroad, and made large scale investments in Hollywood movies with an intention to filter out Chinese sensitive topics, repress dissident voices, and enhance China’s national image. However, the United States’ current examination of foreign investments focuses primarily on high-tech industries involving critical technologies for the sake of national security which concerns the maintenance of the nation’s comparative advantages in economics and security. As human security, which concerns the preservation of liberal ways of life in politics, becomes more and more worthy of attention under the influence of China’s sharp power, more careful investigation of foreign investments in sectors related to public of information and opinion diversity, such as the media, the internet, publishing, and culture, should be taken into consideration. In Taiwan, although such industries have not yet been open to Chinese investors, the authorities still need to remain watchful for fear that Beijing may try to control Taiwanese media via Taiwanese businesses or

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<sup>4</sup> South China Morning Post, “Beijing in 45b Yuan Global Media Drive,” January 13, 2009, <https://www.scmp.com/article/666847/beijing-45b-yuan-global-media-drive>.

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foreign businesses.

Second, regarding **information imports**, Taiwan and the United States should strive to make the sources of extraneous information transparent, manage communication media, and empower the audience on the receiving end. There are generally two ways that Beijing implements its propaganda overseas. One is to place specific content in coverage by paying to the media. Examples include the embedded advertisements that China's Taiwan Affairs Office and provincial/city governments provided to the *China Times* and the *United Daily News*,<sup>5</sup> the columns that China's state-owned *China Daily* sponsored in the *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post* supplements,<sup>6</sup> and the compensation that the China-United States Exchange Foundation (CUSEF) gave to think tanks and academia in America. The other is to offer the content to the media directly, such as free media content translated from Chinese to various foreign languages that Chinese official media provided to foreign radio stations, and the disinformation that Beijing was suspected of disseminating via the

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<sup>5</sup> The Taiwan Control Yuan, "Investigation Report (no. 099 教調 0053)," The Taiwan Control Yuan Website, November 11, 2010, <https://www.cy.gov.tw/sp.asp?xdURL=../di/RSS/detail.asp&ctNode=871&mp=1&no=952>.

<sup>6</sup> Thorsten Benner, Jan Gaspers, Mareike Ohlberg, Lucrezia Poggetti, and Kristin Shi-Kupfer, *Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe* (Berlin, Germany: Global Public Policy Institute & The Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2018), <http://www.gppi.net/publications/rising-powers/article/authoritarian-advance-responding-to-chinas-growing-political-influence-in-europe/>.

internet to affect elections in Taiwan and America. To prevent the public from being deceived and misled by surface information, the authorities in Taiwan and America should not only require communicators to reveal the sources of information and sponsorship according to current laws, but they should also consider launching legal reforms to endow communication media, including internet and social media, with fact-checking responsibility and enforcing new laws with moderate penalties. More importantly, to ensure people's capacity for receiving adequate information and participating in democracy, the government should not merely encourage media literacy by the audience and fact-checking by civic organizations, but it should also consider strengthening both public and private media by establishing incentive mechanisms that support media autonomy and diversity. The ultimate goal is to ensure the existence of alternative sources of information in civil society which is more and more often caught in foreign information warfare.

### **Externally, Weakening Authoritarianism in China**

Taiwan and the United States, should work together with like-minded allies in international society, to urge Beijing to deregulate its authoritarian rule and promote liberalization and democratization in China. First, regarding **capital exports**, the international society should consciously regulate the export of specific advanced technologies to China, especially those that assist in authoritarian governance in China. For instance, since the

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Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has established the Skynet system to observe and monitor citizens in China, and because the implementation of the system requires high-tech components imported from the West, the Netherlands' government has blocked the export license of the company which sold relevant components to China. The international society should also press Beijing to cancel or reduce political and economic regulations so that transnational capital can enter the Chinese market more smoothly. Presently, the United States' claims in the trade war with China are mostly based on its concerns about comparative advantages in economics and security, i.e. the dissatisfaction with China's huge trade surplus with America, subsidies to domestic enterprises in China, enforcement of technology transfer by American companies, and violation of intellectual property rights. However, as Chinese authorities frequently use permission to enter the Chinese market as an incentive or a threat for multinational corporations such as Google to help censor media content and acquire citizen's personal information, the countries involved should consider referring to the white paper that Google released when it retreated from China in 2010,<sup>7</sup> viewing such authoritarian regulations as trade barriers and urging Beijing to deregulate via international organizations such as the WTO.

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<sup>7</sup> Bob Boorstin, "Promoting Free Trade for the Internet Economy," Google Public Policy Blog, November 15, 2010, <https://publicpolicy.googleblog.com/2010/11/promoting-free-trade-for-internet.html>.

Second, regarding **information exports**, by urging the Chinese government to deregulate in politics and economics, international society should provide the Chinese society with more unfiltered, comprehensive, and diverse information. For a long time, Chinese authorities regulated and censored newspapers, books, television programs, movies, and websites originating from the outside world very strictly, which secluded Chinese people living in the closed system preventing them from receiving information and opinions coming from an open system and, in turn, restricted their capacity to freely choose their way of life. Once the CCP's political and economic regulation is loosened, the information coming from the free world would be more likely to penetrate Chinese society. Under these circumstances, an equal competition between liberal and authoritarian values would be likely to emerge in China as well as in the international system, and Chinese people would be able to obtain adequate information to decide the way of life they prefer, which ought to be contributory to liberalization and democratization in China.

In summary, Taiwan and the United States, in response to China's sharp power, should work together with like-minded allies to moderately manage the import and export of capital and information with China in light of the principle of "human security." The ultimate objective is to internally protect and consolidate democratic institutions to avoid Chinese authoritarian permeation, and externally resist and weaken China's



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authoritarian regime to win over people in China and around the world to the side of liberal democracy.