

Dis.information: Russia, China & the Specter of Democracy

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ANDREW HAMMOND: Hi, and welcome to SpyCast from the secret files of the International spy Museum in Washington, DC. I'm Dr. Andrew Harmon, the museum's historian and curator. Every week, SpyCast brings you interesting conversations from authors, scholars and practitioners who live in the world of global espionage. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about SpyCast, or if you want to suggest someone who might be a good future guest, email us at spycast@spymuseum.org. Also, if you like what you hear, and even if you don't, please take a minute to review us on iTunes or whatever platform you may be listening from. We're always looking for ways to make SpyCast better and you can help.

So, I wonder if to start off gentlemen you could just tell us a little bit about who you are.

BRAD HANLON: Yeah, I can start. Well first, thanks for having us Andrew we're really excited to join, and last week's podcast was great. So, we're really excited to build on top of that as well.

My name is Brad Hanlon. As you said, I am an analyst and program manager at the Alliance for Securing Democracy. We aim to find policy solutions to authoritarian interference in democracies and obviously a big part of that is looking at disinformation and authoritarian disinformation targeting democratic institutions.

I personally come at this from a Russia perspective. I've been interested in Russia since I was an undergrad. I studied abroad there and studied the language and sort of while I was tracking their revanchist foreign policy in places like Ukraine and Syria became very much interested in the informational side of what they were doing. So, when I first started tracking Russian state media, looking at the social media campaigns they were launching online to shape narratives around conflicts. And then, that sort of culminated in the 2016 election, when I was focusing on that then.

Since then, I've written a number of publications for the Alliance for Securing Democracy on Russian disinformation basically tracking their operations in 2016 and in the inter-election period where we saw that they were very active, and that disinformation was not specifically focused on elections but on targeting American democracy writ large.

BRYCE BARROS: So, my name is Bryce Barros, and I am the new China analyst at the Alliance for Securing Democracy. So, my purview is looking at everything that has to do with China, in terms of the wide spectrum of malign influence, of which disinformation is a part of it. I got interested in China from studying Japanese in high school and middle school. And then when I went off to college, I was able to switch to Mandarin. And upon doing that I really enjoyed the culture, really like being in China and Taiwan, I decided to move to Taiwan for several years, and I had the privilege of doing a couple of fellowships in China and Taiwan for the Department of Defense. Since I'm a new addition to the team I'm currently working on a couple of projects related to Chinese misinformation.

ANDREW HAMMOND: One of the things that I would like to just tackle before we begin...so, we've got a Russia watcher and a China watcher. So, for people that don't have the luxury of doing what you're doing, how would you describe each of those entities that you are responsible for looking at, like, when we discuss China as a political system, as a social configuration, what exactly are we talking about?

BRYCE BARROS: So, I think within the context of disinformation in watching China it's been a very interesting evolution, especially since COVID-19 has struck. So, I think it's important to preface this with remembering that China does have the ability to influence and interfere in the current election that is going on.

However, most of their disinformation has been related to showing that China is moving ahead with COVID-19 containment, is working towards the vaccine, and combating and promoting disinformation related to Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Hong Kong and Taiwan. So, those have mostly been the main focuses of Chinese disinformation, especially since COVID-19 has come about. And we've noticed at the Alliance for Securing Democracy that China has focused more on trying to promote narratives that are good on those previously mentioned topics, less so of election interference itself.

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However, there are a couple of examples of where China has used networks on Facebook and other social media to promote narratives they're in favor of the two presidential candidates right now in the United States.

BRAD HANLON: Well, the current Russian state is definitely an authoritarian kleptocracy, in which power and wealth are concentrated at the top and cronies of the current regime are able to enrich themselves by receiving contracts and other goods from the state itself.

I think Bryce makes a really important point that kind of highlights a difference between Russia and China when we look at them as threat actors. They're acting on very different time horizons and from very different places. Whereas China is a rising power acting from a position of relative strength with regard to the rest of the world order, Russia is very much not. They have a much shorter time horizon and by many measures they are lessening power, although they like to fancy themselves a great power. And you can see in their interference tactics and in their disinformation that their goal is less to assert themselves as some great system of governments and more to tear down democracy in order to make relative gains.

ANDREW HAMMOND: One of the reasons I wanted to do that was to get a sense of how whatever as those states are shifts or influences its disinformation campaign. So, could you speak a little bit more to that?

BRYCE BARROS: So, I think what's important to remember about China is that is still an authoritarian country, it is based off a Marxist-Leninist system. It does have an interesting hybrid of state capitalism that allows it to sort of project itself abroad in terms of economic coercion, in a way that Russia might not be able to do or even Iran or other, you know, states that are involved in election interference.

So, I think that's a key thing to remember when thinking about how can Chinese disinformation be spread. A big vector for that is within Chinese language media in other parts of the world. However, we've noticed that there's been an increased amount of engagement, especially on Twitter, in disinformation from Chinese government officials through foreign language for whatever specific region or country that those officials happen to be or to specifically target those audiences

BRAD HANLON: I think this is a really good question from the Russia perspective. I think, especially in the United States, we tend to over attribute centralization to Russia's disinformation and interference efforts.

And while there is something to be said about Putin himself and about the powerful intelligence services that operate in Russia and their capacity to carry out interference and disinformation campaigns, there is also a range of other actors that are acting towards the goals of the state. And that's where the kleptocracy comes in with oligarchies who try to curry favor with the regime by pursuing its goals, using their vast resources. So, that's where you get something like the Internet Research Agency, which is more of a government linked entity insofar as the funder is linked to Putin, but isn't per se, controlled by the government itself. And it creates a really interesting and difficult challenge for countering that type of disinformation because it's not all centralized and attribution can be really tricky.

ANDREW HAMMOND: I wonder if one of you wants to tackle what disinformation is? Like what's a useful shorthand definition? I'm sure there's a bigger discussion but for listeners that are just coming to this topic, what exactly are we talking about?

BRAD HANLON: This is one we definitely get asked a lot and I think it's a really important question with a lot of interesting distinctions. So, there are a couple of terms that get used and thrown around sort of interchangeably although there are important differences.

The first is misinformation, which you'll hear a lot regarding sort of domestic issues and COVID-19 misinformation, is sort of false information that's being spread around regardless of the intent behind it. Typically, the people spreading misinformation don't know its misinformation, they think it's true.

Disinformation is sort of the sharp edge of that. That's when false information is being spread intentionally. So, when we're talking about state actors pushing narratives that they know aren't true that's why we talk about disinformation.

But one other really important thing I think to flag is that not all information operations that are carried out by state actors are based entirely on mis- or disinformation. Sometimes there are seeds or kernels of the truth that are

strewn throughout an operation in order to give it credibility and to help it spread further.

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ANDREW HAMMOND: Are China and Russia in any way in some concerted campaign to undermine Americans belief in their political system? Are they operating at cross purposes? Are they an alliance, or are they just, independent of each other but generally working towards the same goal?

BRYCE BARROS: I think it's important to remember that China has more resources than what the Russians and the Iranians have, in terms of disinformation to undermine American democracy. So, to an extent, yes, China does want to undermine American democracy. However, I think China's playing the long game and they're trying to get a sense of what could shake out in this election, who's going to be the next executive of the federal government. However, if you look at the way that China sort of operates in many different venues and many different ways, they're very good at testing out something, and then stepping back a little bit.

BRAD HANLON: I think it's really important to remember that authoritarian information operations, whether it's from Russia or China, interference writ large isn't exclusively targeted at elections. I think every time we approach an election, it's obviously something we start to pay attention to again. That's the legacy of 2016.

But these types of operations have not slowed down in the wake of or the in between times between elections because the goal really isn't to shape the outcome of any particular election. I think something that Russia and China have in common, whether or not they're coordinating on it is a different question, is that they're both aiming to undermine democracy as a system of government itself. So, the overarching aim isn't to support a particular candidate but to discredit the idea of elections and to undermine faith in democratic citizens that their system is working and delivering for them.

So, I think that's a commonality that you see in Russia, China and Iran, definitely that we have tracked. I think we tend to focus so much on which candidate certain information operations are supporting that we might miss the forest for the trees. And the big overarching theme here is that authoritarians are targeting democracy because the existence of that system

of government is a threat to their regimes' legitimacy. So, definitely when it comes to Russia and China that's something they have in common.

ANDREW HAMMOND: A few years ago, I saw this Chinese diplomat at the British Cultural Center in Beijing. And I can almost hear his voice, he would say, "We don't need to do this. You guys are doing a great job of that on your own. Why are you trying to blame us? Why are you scapegoating China?"

BRAD HANLON: Yeah, I think that's a that's a great point. Actually, at the Alliance we just concluded a long-term report that we had worked on with part of a taskforce of really high-level former officials and experts on this to sort of discuss what democracies can do to offset authoritarian advances. And this was a subject that came up a lot. It's something we've seen historically. I mean the Soviet Union was very keen to exploit America's failures in dealing with racism and segregation to make the point that democracy obviously isn't delivering what it says it delivers.

And there's a lot of weight to that. And sort of what we concluded in this taskforce is that if we want to better build resilience to foreign interference and better position ourselves to compete with authoritarians, we need to start at home. We need to ensure that our democratic institutions are what they say they are, we need to ensure that we're delivering for all citizens, and we need to address the domestic challenges that are leaving us vulnerable to foreign interference in the first place.

Earlier this year, Facebook and some of the other social media platforms helped tackle a couple of disinformation operation networks, one targeting voters and information consumers on the left and one targeting folks on the right. And that's pretty typical and what we see with these operations. If you look at Russian state media, you know, RT is their flagship program, and in one channel they managed to target the furthest right of supporters of the president and also far left supporters. And that's always been the game that they try and play.

If you look at the internet research agencies operations in 2016, they managed to stand up pages and accounts on Facebook that would get tens and hundreds of thousands of followers targeting both sides of almost every major political issue in the U.S. So, they would have accounts that would be backing the president, accounts against the president, accounts that would be criticizing NFL players for kneeling during the national anthem and

accounts that would be supporting them. They had Blue Lives Matter and Black Lives Matter accounts. And, you know, it's a really... I think people tend to focus really heavily on this support for President Trump, but they were very much playing both sides of the ball. You know there was one event they held immediately after the election, "Trump is not my president" in New York City and they managed to get as many as 10,000 people to show up in the streets.

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So, it is really important, I think, for us to remember that the goal, you know, of what the Russians and the Internet Research Agency and all their proxies are doing is not really to shape one specific election outcome, it is to divide and specifically polarize, to push people toward the furthest extreme ideas, to destroy that middle ground to ensure that democracy itself just seems like an unattractive and ineffective solution.

BRYCE BARROS: I think for China, the key is to remember that there are some similar goals that China does want. In many ways, China does view democracy as a threat to Chinese Communist Party rule and that's why they do try to do some of these overt and covert ways of undermining democracy through disinformation and other means globally. However, I think it's important within the American context to remember and to reiterate that once again China is trying to sit back and see what will happen in the United States.

However, they have started experimenting with a little bit of the blueprint that Russia has laid out. So, one way that they've done that is through creating Facebook networks that promote both presidential candidates.

I think it's also important to remember that much of this misinformation and disinformation within democracy is sort of spreads out, or it gets more intense as you get closer to China. So, Taiwan is a huge target of Chinese disinformation, especially in the run up to the 2020 election that was held in January, as well as other countries at China's periphery.

However, there are other means that China has to meddle in American democracy. Most of that's related to economic coercion and some of that could include influencing different localities, or different state governments, to abide by policies that might be more in the favor of China in order to get better economic carrots and sticks. They've done that a lot in Taiwan, and

other countries on China's periphery, but they're also starting to do that here in the United States.

However, I think for the time being, they really want to test things out and see how things go and wait until the election comes about. And then if they ever needed to do that, they would be able to do it in a much more well-resourced way.

ANDREW HAMMOND: I said this in last week's episode when we do politics or one or 5000 but when we do intelligence and espionage we're one of a dozen. So, I really want to make sure we're part of that dozen and not one of the 5000. So, help us zero in on what's going on. What intelligence agencies are involved? Is it only intelligence agencies that are involved? Just break that down for us, each of you. Could you have go at it first please, Bryce?

BRYCE BARROS: Thank you for asking that question, I think it's very important. So, within the context of China, I think in terms of direct information, disinformation and China's intelligence agencies, we haven't seen as much activity that we can tribute back to China's main intelligence agencies, at least in the public, non-classified, unclassified realm. So, that'd be the Ministry of State Security, Public Security Bureau, some of the activities that Chinese People's Liberation Army carries out.

However, we have noticed, especially in recent weeks, in recent time, activities where you do have individuals that are PRC nationals, Chinese nationals, trying to stalk and monitor Chinese Americans or Chinese citizens here in the United States. That has risen.

However, we haven't seen as much direct disinformation from China's intelligence agencies. However, it's important to also mention that parts of the Chinese Communist Party's specifically the United Front Work Department, which is targeted towards providing a way of reaching out to Chinese diaspora communities globally, does engage in some of this activity.

BRAD HANLON: Yeah, it's a great question. I think from the Russian perspective, we're seeing a couple of different vectors of influence targeting the 2020 election, which is similar to what we saw in 2016, which was several overlapping operations from several different entities some related to the intelligence services and some not. We're seeing a very similar thing in 2020.

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I think the first one, you're probably familiar with is Andrii Derkach, the Ukrainian politician, that was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department for his role in working with Russian intelligence to really try and spread disinformation about candidate Joe Biden. I think that's one most Americans are pretty familiar with given all of the coverage around that.

I would say a second avenue for influence or interference has been, and this is not related to the intelligence services, the continuation of disinformation from various proxies, whether that's the Internet Research Agency standing up websites targeting Americans or Russian state media continuing to provide, you know, their own bias narratives on developments in the political sphere in the U.S.

I would say the third and the one that concerns me the most, is the recent news about Energetic Bear, the Russian hacking group, targeting U.S. local and state governments. This isn't exactly surprising behavior. Energetic Bear is one of the ridiculous cybersecurity names we use for hacking groups, but they are a well-known hacking operation that is typically tied to the FSB, Russia's domestic intelligence service, and their actions of probing state and local government networks are not exactly new wiser we saw this in 2016. But I think the really important thing and the really important threat that comes out of this, and this was all, you know, became news last week when it was first acknowledged by CISA, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency and the FBI.

The real concern isn't necessarily that these hacking groups, whether it's Energetic Bear or Fancy Bear, the GRU's version, I think the concern is that they won't actually be able to change votes and they don't need to. They just need to create the perception that they could have. And this is what we call the perception hack, which is, I think what most in our field are very worried about going into the 2020 elections. That's what I am worried about with Russian intelligence services, is not their ability to actually change votes or shape outcomes because that's way harder to do than people realize. And I think we've done a lot in the last four years to increase our security on that front. But their ability to convince Americans that they may have done that is really a scary threat. And this was a plan that actually existed in 2016 for them.

At this time, it was Fancy Bear and the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency, they were probing computer networks in various states, without changing vote tallies without trying to touch voter registration information. But they were very much prepared to publicly call into question the validity of the election results.

ANDREW HAMMOND: Can you just expand a little bit more on the perception? That's quite fascinating, what are we talking about there?

BRAD HANLON: Yeah, it's definitely fascinating, or terrifying. Maybe a little bit of both.

The perception hack is basically the concept that in a close contested election where the integrity may be questioned, you don't need to change votes, or damaged voter rolls to hack an election. All you need to do is convince people that you may have been able to do that, and they will do the rest of the work. So the fear is that Russian intelligence services that have been probing these networks could come out in that time period after election day or election night when we don't yet have confirmed results and spread disinformation that claims that they had rigged the election or that they had influenced outcomes.

And they have the tools to potentially penetrate networks, but it's very unlikely they'd actually be able to change votes. But the average American doesn't know that. If they hear that Russians were, you know, probing or penetrating networks, they're going to be worried that maybe their vote didn't count.

ANDREW HAMMOND: Just want to focus on Russia just a little bit more, before we go to China. So, you've mentioned the Internet Research Agency, Energetic Bear, FSB, GRU. For people that are new to this, can you just break all that down?

BRAD HANLON: Yeah, yeah, happy to. I know there's a lot of different actors in this space and sometimes the names are confusing and cheesy. But I think the important thing to take away from the range of actors in the Russia space is that, you know, one, it isn't as centralized as we tend to think it is and two, the range of actors and interest in carrying out disinformation

operations or interfering in democracies just belies that the goal isn't just to influence elections, it is to undermine democracies everywhere, all the time.

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But to run through some of the actors, the Internet Research Agency first came to fame after the 2016 election. They're often described as a troll factory, but it's essentially a company controlled by an oligarch in Russia, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who has close ties to Vladimir Putin. And the company itself is essentially a social media operation where they create fake personas and accounts, and websites, at times, trying to elicit engagement with journalists. All of this to spread disinformation narratives typically targeting partisan issues in countries that they're choosing to target. So, in the United States. They've done a number of operations targeting different sides of political debates on a range of issues. So, that is the IRA.

Outside of that, you definitely have actors in Russia's intelligence services who are quite familiar with the tactics of foreign interference. I think your listeners are probably quite familiar with the historical, how to say it... skills of the KGB when it came to interfering in democracies. You know what, in the lead up to 2020, I often think back to the 1984 Olympics where we saw the KGB sending threatening letters that they claim for from the KKK to Olympic athletes from African and Asian countries. I always think back to that because the end goal there is very much the same as the end goal here, which is to paint America as a failed state. To draw out our failures and make democracy look bad and unattractive to citizens who may be living somewhere like Russia where their democracy is not developed.

So, in that bed I think there's several different actors within the Russian intelligence services that have played parts in the past in interference and in disinformation. Typically, when the intelligence services are involved, we're looking more at their cyber operations, which they use to enable information operations and disinformation. Inside of that bucket, there are a couple different actors that are active and, sorry this is so complex. Fancy Bear, I think is probably the most famous. That is the Russian military intelligence agencies hacking unit. They're also known as ABT 28 or Advanced Persistent Threat 28, which is how the US government actually identifies these actors.

ANDREW HAMMOND: Sorry to interrupt, are they actually a part of the Russian military or they affiliated, or are they are one or two steps removed?

BRAD HANLON: My understanding is they are a part of GRU, Russian military intelligence. They are a unit within that. And there definitely are different hacking collectives and groups that have more of... like a further step away from actual Russian government agencies. But I think Fancy Bear is quite closely tied to Russian military intelligence, in the same way that Cozy Bear, another hacking operation, is tied to SVR, Russian foreign intelligence service, and then Energetic Bear is tied typically to the FSB, Russia's domestic intelligence service.

ANDREW HAMMOND: Just one final question and then we'll move back to China. I guess the question here, if it's not just about putting your thumb on the scale to make sure that one party wins at the expense of another, what's the overall objective here? Why do they want to undermine democracy? What's the bigger reason here? What's driving all of this and what's the ultimate goal?

BRAD HANLON: To steal from some much more articulate and intelligent colleagues that I have, foreign interference is not a tactic it's a strategy. The goal of undermining democracies isn't just some backlash or revenge for the Cold War. It is very much, as you know, Russia and other authoritarian see integral to maintaining regime stability in a world where there is an open information environment. The existence of democratic institutions and the spread of open information and liberal values is a threat to their regime stability, and they have to act, or they feel that they have to act proactively to prevent that. To make democracy look like, you know, an invalid form of government is a way of shoring up their power at home and portraying to the rest of the world that "hey maybe democracy isn't the answer," and to their own citizens that "hey, maybe you shouldn't want this version of government."

ANDREW HAMMOND: Bryce, what's China's ultimate goal in all of this?

BRYCE BARROS: I think it's important to remember that in the case for China and political leadership in Beijing, the key for them is very similar to what Brad mentioned for Russia, which is the existence of a strong democratic United States is, and also democracy is on China's periphery...is a bit of an existential threat for political leadership in Beijing.

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However, I think where it differs from Russia, is that China, for the most part, isn't trying to resort to the same exact sort of tactics that Russia has in terms of being very sharp about this information, being very active about it in the United States to the same extent that Russia has. And I think the best way to put it, would be that Beijing, and by that I mean the Chinese Communist Party leadership and leadership of the government of China, really wants to ensure that they can promote their own narratives abroad that China is doing better than the West. China was able to beat COVID-19. China has a better overall system of governance that's more superior to democracy.

And in some cases, in some different dialogues I've been involved with, I've gotten to see government officials from peripheral countries echo those sorts of statements because of Chinese state capitalism, because of the way that they're able to control COVID-19, in retrospect.

So, I think that's what's important to remember is that China does view democracy and the existence of it as a threat to the Chinese Communist Party. However, they aren't doing the same tactics that Russia is doing, at least here in the United States, at the same extent, but they are very active with democracies around China.

ANDREW HAMMOND: Is their goal similar to Russia's in the sense that they're not necessarily favoring one political party over another, they're more of trying to undermine faith and democracy as a system of government?

BRYCE BARROS: Yes, I would put it in those terms, and that for the moment they still want to wait and see what's going to come out of this election. There's been many debates within the China watcher community about whether or not some of the policies of the Trump administration has had on China are more effective than whatever a potential Biden administration would have and vice versa and how Beijing would want both to happen. However, I do think that their ultimate goal is to ensure regardless of who wins the election that democracy is not seen as legitimate.

ANDREW HAMMOND: I can almost hear someone else's voice and I'm going to channel that voice to give a couple of questions. One of them would be, "well you're telling us all of the stuff that China and Russia are doing to interfere in our elections. What the hell are we doing to give some of this

back to them? Are we interfering in their elections? Are we trying to undermine faith in their systems of government? And if we're not, why the hell are we not?"

BRAD HANLON: Yeah, I can take a stab at this. That's definitely, I've heard that question a lot from family members and friends. And I think it's an important point to discuss. You know, we don't want to engage in the same tactics that authoritarian actors are using to undermine democracy, mainly because if we are adopting those same tactics, then we are undermining democracy ourselves. So, replicating them or trying to fight back on their same terrain it's a losing battle. If the conflict is between authoritarianism and democracy, we should be shifting that battle space to somewhere where we have the advantage.

The best thing we can do to go, I don't want to say the offensive because I don't think an offensive/defensive construct is the right way to look at this, but the best thing we can do is double down on our values and reinvest in democracy. So, strengthen ourselves at home, rebuild our institutions where they need to be strengthened and embrace transparency and openness, as great assets for us and strategic advantages when it comes to competing with authoritarians.

So, that means that, you know, at home protecting our information space but also supporting open information spaces abroad, making sure that an open and free internet continues to exist because that's something authoritarians see as a major threat to themselves, and support for independent media and investigative journalism and enclosed spaces around the world.

Now, the more that we are giving the citizens of autocracies the tools to circumvent the information control that's going on within their countries, the more we are putting autocracies on the backfoot instead of just constantly being on the defensive.

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BRYCE BARROS: So obviously, in the case of China, having a free and open Internet is viewed as a threat, hence why China has the Great Firewall. And having an independent media is also viewed as a threat in China, where for the most part media either goes back to the government or the Chinese Communist Party in some sort of way.

I think what's really important to highlight within the context of China, is that some of the best tools that we have as Americans to, I wouldn't say be on the offensive, but to make our democracy a little bit more resilient and also promote some of the independent journalism that you're not going to get within China or Russia is by, go ahead and utilizing the different tools that we have with Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and in the case of Russia that would be Radio Free Europe, and a couple of other similar U.S. backed journalistic outlets.

ANDREW HAMMOND: I'm just going to use that voice to ask one more question. "How two huge powerful countries with a long history of imperialism of invading and subjugating smaller neighbors, somehow managed to view themselves as victims who need to go on the offensive?"

BRYCE BARROS: I think within the context of China, it's important to remember that for China, the "Century of Humiliation" to Western powers has been a huge driving factor for why China feels that it needs to go ahead and reclaim its space as a powerful country on the global stage. China was the world's largest economy for a long time, for several centuries, sorry several millennia before, you know, the Industrial Revolution in the West and other things like that. And Western powers have had, you know, a bad legacy of...in including Japan of imperialism, in China towards Chinese people, etc.

So, in some ways it's allowed or influenced nationalism within China itself that has driven a lot of the rhetoric and tactics that you're seeing, mostly targeted towards ethnic minorities within China, and then also directed at Taiwan...that is a sort of revanchist sort of way of looking at the world, similar to how Moscow does.

ANDREW HAMMOND: Give us the CliffNotes version of the "Century of Humiliation."

BRYCE BARROS: So, the "Century of Humiliation" runs from the Opium Wars through the Boxer Rebellion, several different conflicts that happened in which the Ching Dynasty the last imperialistic dynasty in China was subjugated to, frankly, sharp and malign influence by Western and Japanese powers. And in some cases that included dividing up aspects of China's territory to become colonies of Japan or extensions of Western powers like the Shanghai International Settlement and in other ways that just included

losing wars to Western powers or to Japan. I think that's probably the best way to sum it up.

BRAD HANLON: I think there is some interesting historical comparisons, but I think the most important thing to look at with Russia is just the nature of the current regime itself. You look at Vladimir Putin himself who was a former KGB officer during the Cold War. Much of the power brokers that he's brought with him into power, the siloviki, are all former KGB or former intelligence or defense officials.

So, their perspective on geopolitics was framed at a time where the United States and democracy writ large was the number one enemy. And I think that's a perspective that's not easy to shake. I think it's very much colored the way they perceive a lot of U.S. foreign policy actions, since the end of the Cold War, and it's still very much dominates the way that they see the world now. It's very much a zero-sum game of geopolitics, in which they have to compete with the United States, they have to compete with democracy, in order to continue to exist.

ANDREW HAMMOND: If any listeners get those questions at the Thanksgiving table, they know have some food for thought.

And is it only the United States that Russia and China are targeting for disinformation?

BRAD HANLON: Yeah, that's a fantastic question. I think ahead of the U.S. election we tend to focus too much in on ourselves. But one thing we've really, really covered at the Alliance for Securing Democracy is that this is not just about the United States. It is about democracy as a system of government. And we focus mostly on the transatlantic space, but we've tracked Russian information operations in, I think, 27 different countries across that space. And while the instances that occur in the U.S. are more famous, there are times when they target democracies in Europe where it's much more egregious.

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BRYCE BARROS: In the case of China, that's definitely what they do is they like to test things within their near abroad. So, as I mentioned Taiwan tends to be our bear the brunt of a lot of Chinese disinformation.

ANDREW HAMMOND: I think the next question is, so we know that China and Russia are involved in disinformation, we have discussed the United States and some other democracies. Do they interfere in each other's internal politics?

BRAD HANLON: I don't think we see that very much. I think there's a maybe an "honor amongst thieves code" with authoritarians interfering. But a lot of that also has to do with the main goals of interference are to undermine democracy and there isn't much work to be done for China to undermine democracy in Russia and vice versa. So, that's probably a large reason why you don't see activity on that front. I think there are better targets for them to focus on.

ANDREW HAMMOND: How well is the United States, or how well are democracies placed for the cyber contest? Give us a sense of that new confrontation which isn't about armored divisions on the North German Plain? Give us a sense of the order of battle, so to speak, on that new battle space?

BRAD HANLON: I think that's a really good thing to drill down into. I think the competition between autocracies and democracies is multi-dimensional. And a lot of it occurs in as you said non-military domains. So, we're looking at competition in the information space, in technology development, in the economic sphere, and in the political sphere.

We've seen that authoritarians have taken the initiative in many of these spaces, while democracies have mostly sat on our hands, right? I mean authoritarians have seized on the cyber and information spheres in ways that we haven't. They're investing heavily in emerging technology development, and they're doing their best to shape the norms and standards around those things in international institutions to ensure that things like the future of the internet and future technologies are coherent with autocracies and instead of democracies.

Fortunately, I think, despite that we've allowed authoritarians to shape the battle thus far, democracies have inherent long-standing advantages. Our system of governance is more appealing. Open and free information spaces bring about better policy solutions than the top-down control that you see in authoritarian governments. Our innovation economy has been much more effective, historically, at producing the next technologies and creating the

most innovative businesses in the world and attracting the talent that it needs to do so.

So, I think there are a lot of things that we can seize on and a lot of advantages that we have, if we so will ourselves to use them in this competition.

ANDREW HAMMOND: Both of you gentlemen are at the Alliance for Securing Democracy. Are democracies in crisis? So, we used to hear about the second wave, the third wave of democracy. Everybody was going to be a democrat, every country was going to adopt this system. And now it seems to be, “oh, hold on, maybe we’re not quite so sure.” Is that true?

BRAD HANLON: I mean I think in the past few decades we've seen a retreat in democratic values. You'll have to check me on this, I think the 14th consecutive year that Freedom House's report on this, so there's been a retraction of civil liberties around the world. And that's the combination of a lot of different, you know, incidences and challenges that have led to that. But I don't think democracy overall is in crisis. As I said before, we retain a lot of advantages in this competition on paper. We are the more attractive system of governance. We are more effective and marshaling resources. And in the long term, much more effective at gaining soft power and citizens who actually want to live in our societies. That's a tremendous advantage.

ANDREW HAMMOND: Just one final question. I wonder if there's anything that you think is important for our listeners to take away or to think about with regards to intelligence espionage on disinformation, with regards to each of the respective countries that you focus on.

BRAD HANLON: I can start, and I would be remiss if I didn't speak to the U.S. voter. I would ask those consuming information around the election to do a couple of different things to make sure that we're best mitigating the effects of Russian disinformation or whatever their intelligence services do decide to do in the aftermath of the election.

The first is to be patient. We're not going to have final results on election night, and that's okay. That's not a delay, that is the mechanisms of our democratic process at work, ensuring that we have a secure and accurate result.

The second thing I would ask is to be cautious. Information operations, Russian disinformation especially, are aimed to elicit rapid emotional responses. They want you to see something react emotionally and click without thinking. I would ask think before you click, before you retweet or share. Double check the provenance of information that you're seeing online and look to trusted sources in the media and government for information on the threats that we face.

And the last thing that I would say, I have to say, is vote. Trust in our institutions. We have plenty of local and state election officials, from both sides of the aisle, doing their absolute best to make sure we have a free, fair and secure election. Look to them for information on voting processes and make sure to stay engaged even after the election.

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ANDREW HAMMOND: The International Spy Museum is a full 501c3 nonprofit. If you want to donate to the museum, or if you're local and would like to volunteer at the museum, please visit our website spy-museum.org for more information.

This SpyCast audio was transcribed by Gillian Rich on 12/02/20 for the International Spy Museum.