Countering Russian & Chinese Influence Activities

Examining Democratic Vulnerabilities & Building Resiliency

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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A Report of the CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program and the CSIS Southeast Asia Program
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Introduction

Since 2014 and the events leading up to the annexation of Crimea, awareness and understanding of Russian malign influence activities across Europe and the United States have grown. More recently, Chinese influence activities in countries throughout the Indo-Pacific region have become the subject of growing scrutiny and concern. Whereas Russian influence efforts have aimed to disrupt and delegitimize democratic institutions, China has sought to permeate and influence democratic societies in order to coopt and constrain public debate on China and silence critics of the Chinese communist regime. The influence activities of these authoritarian regimes pose a common threat to democracies but in different ways and with varying degrees of success.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shed new light on Russian and Chinese influence activities and created new opportunities for Moscow and Beijing to advance geopolitical goals through a range of influence operations, including through disinformation efforts. Despite greater awareness of the challenge to democracies posed by these authoritarian systems, governments need to develop better and more effective countermeasures.

There is a growing body of research which describes the strategies and tactics of influence activities—the supply of influence—coming from Moscow and Beijing. This research illuminates tactics and strategies as well but focuses on achieving a better understanding of how and why influence activities are consumed within democratic societies—the demand side of the equation. How does disinformation enter and shape the information ecosystem within democratic societies? In what ways do domestic actors benefit from the supply of foreign influence activities? Which efforts have been successful in influencing societies and political outcomes and why? Which activities have failed and why?

It is with this in mind that CSIS set out to analyze Russian influence activities in the United Kingdom and Germany and Chinese influence activities in Japan and Australia. We sought to better understand how these influence efforts play out in these four democracies and how these governments and societies have (or have not) responded. We examined which factors make countries particularly vulnerable to Chinese or Russian malign influence operations and identified the sources of resilience that enable democratic governments and polities to mitigate, fend off, or push back on malign efforts. We also sought to determine the degree to which China and Russia have been successful in influencing outcomes through their activities. Finally, we assess how the strategies and tactics used by Russia and China differ or converge.
States engage in a range of activities designed to shape public attitudes and perceptions in ways that enhance the image of their country and advance their strategic goals. These efforts include public diplomacy, cultural and people-to-people exchange, and other forms of communication and engagements, all of which are legitimate when they are transparent, open, and easily attributable to governments. By contrast, malign influence activities are designed to manipulate and distort the normal course of civic discussion, public debate, and democratic policymaking within targeted countries. To illuminate such malign behavior, this research employs the “3 Cs” framework coined by former Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull, which defines malign activities as those that are “covert, coercive, or corrupting.”¹ Malign influence activities disrupt the normal democratic political processes in a target country by manipulating public discourse, discrediting the electoral system, biasing the development of policy, or disrupting markets for the purpose of advancing a political or strategic goal.² These efforts are typically non-transparent and outside the rule of law and run counter to liberal democratic norms. We distinguish “malign” activities from legitimate or benign public diplomacy efforts conducted in a transparent and open manner.

Malign influence efforts may include efforts to manipulate and distort the information environment through information operations, which are “actions taken by organized actors (governments or non-state actors) to distort domestic or foreign political sentiment, most frequently to achieve a strategic and/or geopolitical outcome.”³ This may include the use of propaganda, an admittedly broad term which loosely refers to the “dissemination of information—facts, arguments, rumors, half-truths, or lies—to influence public opinion.”⁴

² Ibid.
Disinformation is a preferred tool of influence within information operations. It is important to separate disinformation, which is the spread of “deliberately false information, or dissemination of such information, especially when supplied by a government or its agent to a foreign power or to the media, with the intention of influencing the policies or opinions of those who receive it,” and misinformation, which is the inadvertent or unintentional spread of deceptive information without malign intent. Disinformation is about intentionality.5

There is extensive discussion regarding corruption. Corruption is the alleged or reported exercise of one’s power, position, or resources in order to exploit or exert undue influence over businesses, individuals, or state bodies and institutions, often but not exclusively through nontransparent and unlawful means. Corruption is a commonly used tool to capture either a specific individual (“elite capture”) or, at extreme levels of corruption, the state and its institutions (“state capture”). The examples we cite support in the report are our observations of how corruption and elite capture work based on open-source facts and information, but these observations do not suggest or accuse any specific individuals of wrongdoing.6

This report begins with an examination of Russian influence activities in the United Kingdom and Germany. The authors of each case study assess Russia’s country-specific tactics, analyze vulnerabilities to these tactics within each case study, and conclude with a determination of the impact of Russian malign influence tactics. We then turn to an examination of Chinese influence activities in Japan and Australia. The authors also examine Chinese tactics in each case study, as well as their vulnerabilities and the overall impact of Chinese influence activities. After assessing the Russian and Chinese “supply” of influence activities and the demand and receptivity of these activities in the four case studies, the report concludes with an analysis of the commonalities and differences of Chinese and Russian influence activities and draws conclusions about how democracies can better resist malign influence.

Russian Information Operations

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom’s political, economic, and military strength and its close relationship with the United States make it a prime target for Russian influence activities. Russian influence activities in the United Kingdom emphasize disruption more than elite cultivation. This is in part because of diminished and tense bilateral relations resulting from a “values gap” and divergence of views on the international system; policy differences over Ukraine, Syria, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and EU enlargement; and mutual accusations of domestic interference in one another’s politics. This low-trust environment leaves little basis for collaboration, while limited economic interaction opens fewer channels for Russia to exercise its influence. Public opinion on both sides mirrors this skepticism: according to a 2019 Pew poll, 68 percent of British people polled had an unfavorable view of Russia, while a 2018 Levada poll found that 51 percent of Russians held a negative (19 percent) or very negative (32 percent) view of the United Kingdom.  

Russian influence efforts in the United Kingdom have sought to erode unity both within the United Kingdom and in Europe more generally, including through different forms of support to pro-Brexit campaigns. This reflects a view in Moscow that Brexit makes the United Kingdom a less valuable partner to the United States and gives Washington less influence in Europe post-Brexit. Russia has also aimed to diminish the United Kingdom’s role in the world by generating skepticism around the value of the U.S.-UK relationship, trying to inflict reputational damage upon the United Kingdom’s role in NATO, and circulating negative stories about the European Union while supporting the “Leave” campaign for the United Kingdom to exit the body.

While initially haphazard, Russian malign influence activities in the United Kingdom are increasingly event-driven, spiking before a major decision, vote, or anniversary or just after a potentially controversial event. For example, ahead of the June 2016 Brexit referendum, officials saw a significant uptick in tweets linked to Russia-based accounts. Researchers at Swansea University in Wales and the University of California, Los Angeles found that some 150,000 Russian-language Twitter accounts posted tens of thousands of messages urging Britain to leave the European Union in the days before the referendum—an increase from 1,000 a day two weeks before the vote to 45,000 over the last 48 hours before the vote. The approach was not so much to take a side on the divisive issue as to “flood the zone” with “a combination of accurate, half-true, and false information . . . in order to introduce confusion and doubt into existing debates.” In another example, Russian disinformation targeted the result of a September 2014 Scottish independence referendum: pro-Russian internet trolls were used to circulate disinformation claiming the vote was fraudulent and to encourage pro-independence campaigners to petition for a repeat of the referendum.

In addition to flooding the social media space to create general confusion and doubt, Russia has leveraged traditional media in more overt support of the Leave campaign and associated pro-Brexit parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Narratives carried by the English-language publications of Russian state-sponsored media outlets such as RT and Sputnik aimed to discredit the European Union “by painting it as

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ineffective, corrupt, and infringing upon UK sovereignty.”¹¹ This coverage also sought to exploit existing anxieties around immigration, UK sovereignty, and a loss of British “culture,” resulting from globalization and its consequences for economic displacement in Britain’s rustbelt regions.

Russia has also used financial support to achieve its aims, taking advantage of gaps in the United Kingdom’s regulatory regime in order to funnel money through shell organizations.¹² Specifically, although UK campaign finance law prohibits contributions from non-British companies and individuals, it does not require disclosure of political donations if they are from “the beneficial owners of non-British companies that are incorporated in the EU and carry out business in the UK.”¹³ The most infamous case is that of pro-Brexit financier Arron Banks, who donated nearly $10 billion (£8 million) to the Leave campaign. The UK National Crimes Agency, referred by the UK Electoral Commission, completed its investigation regarding the origins of a Banks’ donation, the largest-ever political donation in British history, but no evidence of criminality was uncovered.¹⁴

VULNERABILITIES
While the United Kingdom is a vibrant democracy, political polarization stemming from cultural and societal divisions has become more pronounced, particularly around Brexit, which Russia used to exploit anti-elite sentiments and magnify fears about immigrants and the erosion of British (particularly English) “culture.” Those who voted Leave “tended to be older, male, live in less densely populated areas, and have lower levels of income and education,” while “those who voted Remain were younger, lived mostly in cities and areas with sizable immigrant populations, and had higher levels of education and income.”¹⁵ Separatist sentiment in Scotland and tensions within Northern Ireland present further opportunities for Russian information operations. Compounding these societal cleavages is a highly partisan commercial print journalism sector.

As noted above, there is a significant loophole in the UK campaign finance law which covers donations to political parties. The law prohibits contributions from non-British companies and individuals, but it does not require disclosure of political donations from the beneficial owners of non-British companies that carry out business in the United Kingdom. This likely enabled Russian money to flow to pro-Brexit political parties through entities registered outside the United Kingdom, including from the British Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies, such as industry lobby groups and venture capital funds. Nevertheless, there is little evidence of Russian-origin campaign donations

¹¹ Committee on Foreign Relations Minority Staff, Putin’s Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Its Implications for the United States (Washington, DC: United States Senate, 2018), https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf.
¹⁵ Ellehuus, Mind the Gaps.
occurring on a wide scale or of Russian money shifting UK party positions on policies affecting Russia, such as EU sanctions policy.

The UK-Russia economic relationship is much smaller than the relationship between Germany and Russia and has not resulted in a significant business lobby advocating for better relations with Moscow. However, there are long-standing concerns around illicit finance and London’s status as a destination for Russian money and affiliation with off-shore tax havens. Steps taken by the UK government since 2016 have begun to address this issue, including by introducing open registers of beneficial ownership so that anyone can see who owns a specific property.16

Traditional public broadcast media in the United Kingdom is subject to legislation that requires it to ensure that any news is accurate and impartially provided, and this legislation is regularly enforced. The UK Office of Communication (Ofcom) in July 2019 fined the Russian news channel RT £200,000 ($249,160) for “serious and repeated failures to comply with our broadcasting rules” related to impartiality, particularly in its report of the Skripal poisoning and Syrian conflict.

Conversely, social media content is not held to these same standards. The United Kingdom does not have any legislation that regulates the veracity of news posted online, and its electoral law does not prohibit false or misleading information in political advertising.

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Germany

Germany’s centrality to the project of European integration and its historical relationship with Russia make it an important target for Russian influence activities, which include disinformation propagated through both traditional and social media, support for Kremlin-friendly parties and movements, and elite capture. Instances such as the 2016 “Lisa case” and interference in 2017 Bundestag election campaign provide powerful examples of Russian malign influence activities.

However, Russian efforts at disruption play a relatively peripheral role in sustaining Russian influence in Germany. Instead, Moscow has concentrated its efforts on leveraging longstanding political, business, and cultural links, reflecting Germany’s status as an influential player in the European Union and thus, to the extent possible, “an important prize to be cultivated rather than a target to be destabilized.”

Russia’s influence in Germany is comparatively strong, though Germany’s very familiarity with Russia has also proved a source of resiliency against Russia’s more disruptive efforts.

TACTICS

As in other countries, Russian disinformation in Germany focuses on exploiting political and cultural fissures and promoting extreme political parties, including the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the far-left Die Linke. However, the limited penetration of Russian state-backed media outlets in Germany has elevated the role of indigenous actors within this disinformation ecosystem. Increasingly, the Kremlin channels resources to online platforms such as Ruptly TV and Redfish, whose connections to Russia, unlike those of RT and Sputnik, are not openly stated. These outlets amplify pro-Kremlin narratives while also promoting a range of cultural messages used to identify target political constituencies. Russian-speaking communities in Germany are a primary target of Russian disinformation.

The most notable example of Russian disinformation in Germany is the so-called “Lisa case,” involving a 13-year-old Russian-German dual citizen named Lisa F. who claimed to have been abducted and raped by migrants. While Berlin police quickly determined that her story was a fabrication, Russian media outlets seized on the case to stoke anti-immigrant sentiment and mistrust of German authorities, resulting in significant protests by German far-right groups and within the Russian diaspora community.

This narrative was given additional strength when Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called on the German government not to “sweep under the rug” the allegations and to ensure that “these migration problems do not lead to a politically correct attempt to ‘varnish’ the truth on behalf of some domestic political goals.” For Berlin, Lavrov’s commentary represented an unprecedented sign of a concerted Russian state effort to distort German politics. Subsequent Russian disinformation campaigns followed, including one targeting the 2017 Bundestag elections and an attempt in 2019 to cover up the involvement of Russian...

19. Ibid.
security services in the assassination of former Georgian-Chechen militant Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin. However, these efforts failed to gain much traction compared to similar electoral interference operations against the United States and France.\(^{20}\n
While Russia has tried its hand at disinformation in Germany, the most important avenue of Russian influence operations has been efforts to cultivate members of the German elite to support specific policies (such as a relaxation of sanctions). “The efficacy of these attempts at elite capture is reinforced by the presence of a large cadre of ‘Russia understanders (\textit{Russlandversteher})’ in German politics and business.”\(^{21}\) Moscow coopts these figures through business deals, lucrative positions on corporate boards, and opportunities to participate in “informal and non-transparent networks [and] exchanges,” such as the German-Russian Forum (Deutsch-Russische Forum).\(^{22}\) The best known example is Gerhard Schröder negotiating the Nord Stream pipeline as German chancellor before becoming chairman of the consortium that went on to construct both Nord Stream 1 and 2.

Attempts to cultivate fringe parties and movements such as the right-wing AfD and the left-wing \textit{Die Linke}, as well as the grassroots anti-migration group PEGIDA, run parallel with Moscow’s efforts to gain mainstream support from centrist parties and big business. Such fringe targeting offers Moscow another way to influence the political debate and put pressure on the centrist government while amplifying the voices of Euroskeptic or

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\(^{21}\) Mankoff, \textit{With Friends Like These}.

anti-NATO actors. However, this approach faces constraints. German party finance laws and disclosure requirements are unusually strict, so evidence of direct financial support to extreme parties is scarce. Moreover, views of Russia within extreme parties varies, with some pro-Russian voices motivated as much by a desire for media attention as by any political or ideological commitment.\[23\]

**VULNERABILITIES**

Compared to its Western neighbors, Germany is less vulnerable to disruptive Russian influence. This resiliency stems in part from Germany’s comparatively high levels of political and social cohesion. While Russian information operations find limited success online, traditional media outlets dominate the German media markets and curtail the reach of Russian state-sponsored outlets. Germany has responded to online disinformation by mandating content monitoring and the removal of “junk news” as part of the Network Enforcement Act (Gesetz zur Verbesserung der Recht durchsetzung in sozialen Netzwerken, known as NetzDG). While political-cultural fissures such as migration provide fuel for Russian information operations, Russia’s disruptive efforts have largely fallen flat.

Germany’s reliance on Russian energy, its role as a distribution hub for European gas, and the concentration of Russia-related business among major German companies are primary avenues for Russian economic influence, even if overall trade volumes are small. These economic linkages foster pragmatism in Germany’s approach to Russia. The legacy of Willy Brandt’s 1970s Ostpolitik, which posits a cautious approach to Moscow designed to bring Russia onto a more European path, also contributes to this pragmatism. While German views of Russia have hardened since the onset of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, “this history remains part of the German elites’ intellectual scaffolding.”\[24\]

Finally, the various Russian-speaking communities as well as the lasting cultural divide between former East and West Germans provide openings for Russian influence. Germany’s population of 3 million Soviet-born immigrants and their children retain a distinct “outsider” identity and engage more with Russian media and culture. Citizens from the former German Democratic Republic, while not a formal diaspora, are in similar ways dissociated from mainstream political discourse: they tend toward Euroskepticism, are more hostile to ethnic and religious minorities and migration, and tend to be more supportive of far-left and far-right parties.

23. Mankoff, With Friends Like These.
24. Ibid.
Russia’s Impact

In both Germany and the United Kingdom, high public trust in traditional media is a source of immunity to foreign information operations. Close to one-third of Germans watch the state-run ARD network’s evening news, while in the United Kingdom nearly 50 percent of adults from across the ideological spectrum rely on the BBC as their main source of news. Private media outlets have a clear charter and oversight mechanism. Russian state-sponsored outlets such as RT and Sputnik are present in both countries and target fringe segments of the population but have little influence on mainstream political discourse. However, an increasing reliance on less-regulated social media as a source for information presents a growing challenge in both countries.

While on the whole Russia exercises less influence in the United Kingdom, Russian information operations there have proven more disruptive. This outcome is less a result of Russian actions than of sharp societal divisions around Brexit and a less regulated online media and tabloid environment. In Germany, Moscow’s efforts to exploit cultural fissures and promote extreme political actors have largely fallen flat, due largely to Germany’s more centrist political consensus and more consolidated media landscape.

The United Kingdom increasingly views influence activities through a security lens. This is evident in its 2018 National Security Capabilities Review, which recognizes influence activities as a hostile state activity that requires handling as not only a strategic communications issue but also a security and counterintelligence issue.25 It has deployed

a robust “whole-of-government” response that makes use of the full range of UK capabilities, including economic levers, military resources, and wider diplomatic efforts. Rather than respond to each instance of disinformation, the United Kingdom focuses its efforts on those malign influence efforts that are likely to have the greatest impact, such as election interference, and on building societal resilience, for example, through an extensive media literacy program.

Berlin’s response to Russian information operations is less securitized and has centered on producing counter-narratives that emphasize factual information. This approach benefits from Germans’ high levels of trust in their government and the premium placed on societal consensus, which allows Germany to more comfortably coexist with some level of disinformation.
Chinese Influence Operations

**Australia**

Like Japan, Australia is an attractive target for Chinese influence operations because of its strategic value as a U.S. ally in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific region. Beijing’s ultimate goal is to peel Australia away from the U.S. alliance, but even neutralizing Australia on a key issue such as the South China Sea would pay huge dividends in terms of undercutting American regional leadership. Australia’s growing economic dependence on China and its large Chinese diaspora create points of leverage that Beijing has sought to exploit. Chinese influence operations in Australia “show consistent, patient and strategic efforts to cultivate networks of influence, develop long-term dependencies, and shape discourse on China across many facets of politics, business and society.”

However, Beijing’s attempts to influence Australia’s foreign policy and control public discussion regarding the Chinese party-state ultimately fell short. Australia’s free press, political leadership and bipartisanism on China, and strong democratic values all contributed to an effective pushback on Beijing’s malign influence campaign. Revelations of Beijing’s attempts to interfere with Australian politics and society led to a swift government response and a bipartisan consensus on recalibrating China policy. It also provoked a backlash in public opinion toward China, with trust in China falling by a full 20 percentage points in one year, dropping from 52 percent to 32 percent between 2018 and 2019, according to the Lowy Institute public opinion survey.

**TACTICS**

The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) influence efforts in Australia have focused on political influence buying, elite capture, and coopting and controlling the Chinese diaspora. In the political realm, wealthy businessmen of Chinese descent with deep ties to the CCP sought to influence political parties and their policies toward China with the help of lax campaign finance laws, which have subsequently been tightened to ban foreign political donations. The case of Sam Dastyari, formerly a rising star in the Labor Party, became a cautionary tale when it was revealed that he had delivered friendly talking

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points on the South China Sea in contradiction to his party’s position at an event for
Chinese-language media organized by his political patron Huang Xiangmo. Huang was a
major donor to both the Labor and Liberal Parties and had controversially paid some legal
bills for Dastyari.

The Dastyari affair led to a period of intense media scrutiny into the myriad of ways in
which Beijing was seeking to influence Australian politics and society through CCP-
linked proxies and organizations and various tactics of cooptation and interference. These
revelations threw light on a once little-known department within the CCP, the United
Front Work Department, which Mao has called a “magic weapon” for advancing Beijing’s
interests. The United Front’s elaborate network of proxies and front organizations had
for years been actively cultivating influence in Australia’s ethnic Chinese community
and building influence in academia, the media, and the political community. The goal of
United Front activity is to unite the Chinese diaspora in support of the Chinese party-
state, cultivate other influential voices who can serve as “friends of Beijing” in public
discussion of China, sideline critics, and silence dissent.

Through its decades-long United Front work, the CCP has sought to gain influence and
leverage over the Chinese-Australian community by coopting Chinese-language media and
local civic organizations, to promote narratives and individuals who are friendly to Beijing,
and stifle critical voices. Over time, independent voices within the Chinese diaspora
in Australia became scarcer. Meanwhile, the leadership of civic, business, and political
organizations in the Chinese-Australian community often had close ties with the CCP.
Independent Chinese-language media has been a prime target of CCP efforts to control
the information and perspectives available to Chinese-speaking Australians. Independent
media outlets that did not hew to a pro-Beijing line were squeezed financially by pressure
on advertisers to drop their sponsorship. The dependence of many Chinese-speaking
Australians on CCP-curated news and information is exacerbated by the popularity
of Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat, a heavily censored space which,
according to one study, serves as the primary source of news for 60 percent of Mandarin
speakers in Australia.28

Australian academics and universities have also been the targets of CCP influence efforts,
many of which are covert and coercive. Overseas Chinese students studying at Australian
universities are subject to surveillance and intimidation, including the “midnight knock
on the door” by Beijing security agents for family back home in China when a student
engages in activities deemed unpatriotic by Beijing. Consular officials play an active
role in supporting and sometimes organizing students in patriotic activities such as
demonstrations and objections to curricular materials. Professors have found themselves
targeted by Chinese social media campaigns organized by students and complaints by
Chinese consular officials to university administrators when their lectures or teaching
materials are found offensive to Chinese students.

Confucius Institutes are also prevalent in Australian universities, although they are used
primarily as a vehicle for benign, soft-power influence. However, “the overarching problem

theconversation.com/how-australias-mandarin-speakers-get-their-news-106917.
for universities when it comes to dealing with undue or malign Chinese influence is the growing economic dependence of universities on large numbers of Chinese students. This reliance on Chinese student revenue, as well as on research linkages to Chinese institutions, creates a natural constituency of support among university leadership for maintaining cooperative ties with Beijing and downplaying risks to academic freedom and integrity, for example, from dual-use technological research.

Finally, the CCP uses race and ethnicity as a wedge to “divide Australian society, tamp down debate on Chinese government policy and conduct in Australia, and delegitimize any criticism of Beijing.” In its diplomatic messaging, the CCP seeks to conflate criticism of the regime with racist attacks on all Chinese people. Xi Jinping calls the diaspora the “sons and daughters” of China, implying that “one’s identity and loyalty are not defined by nationality” but by “race or ethnicity.” The goal is to unite the diaspora while dividing the rest of Australian society by playing on the sensitivities of citizens who are mindful of the legacy of racism in Australia and proud of the vibrant multicultural society it has become.

Beijing sharpened its tool kit after the Australian government enacted tough counter-interference measures and began leading discussions with international counterparts about Chinese malign influence efforts. China put Australia in a deep “diplomatic freeze” that lasted well over a year and ramped up its diplomatic rhetoric, accusing Canberra of being motivated by racism and a “cold war mentality.” Beijing also issued vague threats of economic retaliation which were sometimes followed through with a degree of plausible deniability, such as a slowdown of iron ore imports from Australia. When the Australian government began calling for an independent inquiry into the origins of the Covid-19 outbreak in April, Beijing shifted to an even harsher and more direct playbook, including a vitriolic diplomatic offensive and the brazen use of economic coercion. Beijing caustically denounced Australia as acting as a lackey of the United States and assailed Australian politicians as well as Australian society as a whole as being deeply, systemically racist. The Chinese ambassador threatened boycotts of Australian beef and wine, tourists, and students, and Beijing quickly followed through on these threats with trade restrictions on beef and barley and warnings to Chinese tourists and students to avoid Australia due to an alleged rise in discrimination against Asians in Australia.

VULNERABILITIES

Chinese influence activity in Australia played on several key vulnerabilities unique to Australia. Of all advanced industrial democracies, Australia is the most heavily dependent on trade with China. China buys a third of everything that Australia sells to the world, including iron ore and other mining commodities, agricultural goods, and wine, and China is also by far the largest source of tourists and students studying in Australian universities. These deep economic linkages create a natural constituency of support in the business community and university sector. Australian business leaders, university administrators, and state and local politicians have incentives to self-censor or embrace Beijing-friendly views in order to preserve and deepen economic ties.

29. Searight, Countering China’s Influence Operations.
30. Ibid.
Two other notable features made Australia particularly vulnerable among advanced democracies, at least in the eyes of Beijing. First, Australia was one of the few advanced democracies in the world that did not prohibit campaign donations from foreigners, creating a wide-open loophole for wealthy Chinese political benefactors with links to the CCP to inject large amounts of money into political campaigns. In the wake of the scandals that emerged involving large China-linked donations to Australian politicians, legislation to ban political donations by foreign entities and increase disclosure requirements was passed with strong bipartisan support in late 2018.

Second, Australia has a large community of ethnic Chinese-Australian citizens, who are natural targets for United Front activity. Nearly 5 percent of Australians have Chinese ancestry, and the voting weight of this group is augmented by the fact that a proportionally higher number live in several key battleground electoral districts in Melbourne and Sydney, where Chinese Australians represent up to 15 percent of the voting base. It is in these Chinese-Australian communities where the CCP and United Front have worked for decades to cultivate close ties with Beijing by coopting Chinese community organizations, providing supportive networks for people sympathetic to the Chinese party-state to rise in local prominence, filtering out negative media coverage in Chinese-language press, and drowning out critics.

Australia’s strong democratic institutions and liberal values have been a source of both vulnerability and resiliency. Chinese students on university campuses and astroturfed demonstrations in the Australian-Chinese community provide opportunities for full-throated expressions of patriotic fervor and pro-Beijing sentiments. Australia’s legal
system, which provides strong protections against libel and slander, offers an avenue for wealthy CCP-linked individuals to sue journalists for defamation, raising the cost of investigative journalism into Chinese influence activities. The CCP is quick to play on liberal affirmation of multiculturalism and tolerance and sensitivities regarding Australia’s legacy of racism by defining public discussions of Beijing’s policies and conduct in Australia as racist attacks on China and Chinese people. At the same time, however, Australia’s boisterous and independent free press was a major driver behind the revelations and subsequent public debate over covert Chinese influence activities. Strong national pride in Australian democracy and sovereignty has been an equally important source of resilience. Australian political leaders have rebuffed threats and financial inducements by CCP-linked donors to soften China policy, while public opinion has strongly backed Canberra’s efforts to push back against malign interference and economic bullying by Beijing.

Australia: Opinions on China

![Australia Opinion Chart]


**Japan**

Japan is a natural target for Chinese influence given its geographical proximity, economic weight, and long-standing alliance with the United States. China’s goals in Japan are broadly consistent with its goals elsewhere: to foster a positive image in Japanese society, to recruit Japan to join Chinese initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and to gradually peel Japan away from its alliance with the United States.

Yet despite a significant economic relationship, Japan has proved resilient to these influence activities: a 2019 Pew Research poll found that Japan had the most negative views of China among all 34 countries surveyed, at 85 percent negative. This reflects, in part, a deep bias
against China among the Japanese public based on centuries of animosity but also the overall low levels of penetration of Chinese influence resulting from Japan’s homogenous society, political stability, and oligopolistic media landscape.

**TACTICS**

Chinese attempts to shape views and policy in Japan make use of tactics ranging from benign, public diplomacy efforts—cultural diplomacy, bilateral exchanges, state media spin—to sharper forms of influence that fall under the “three Cs”—covert, coercive, and corrupt—including coercion, information campaigns, and corruption.

International forums and symposiums are one instrument China uses to cultivate relationships with Japanese political and cultural elite and to present a wider, positive image of itself. One notable example is the Beijing-Tokyo Forum, sponsored by Japan’s non-profit Genron NPO and the CCP-owned China International Publishing Group, which hosts hundreds of influential participants from business, political, academic, and media circles and is an effective platform for highlighting positive elements within the bilateral relationship. The most recent iteration, held in Beijing in October 2019, focused on the theme of a “new era, new hope: responsibilities China and Japan shoulder to maintain the peace and development of Asia and the world,” which was labeled the “highest public diplomatic communication platform between China and Japan.” In reality, the amount of influence China wields in these forums is limited.

Confucius Institutes (CIs) are another central component of China’s influence activities internationally and in Japan. Officially tasked with promoting friendship with the CPP through a variety of activities, including Chinese language and culture classes, CIs have come under heightened scrutiny in recent years for breaking the norms of traditional public diplomacy by spreading CCP propaganda at universities, stifling criticism of the CCP, and intelligence gathering. Organizationally, CIs are part of a network of CCP organs that includes the United Front Work Department—the division of the CCP tasked with influencing people outside of the party. Since 2005, 15 CIs have opened at private universities in Japan. They are an enticing offer given Japan’s falling youth population and the promise of such institutes to increase funding and student enrollment from Chinese partner universities. Still, public universities have been wary of accepting CIs, and political and media scrutiny of these institutes is mounting.

As in other countries, the CCP prioritizes targeting the Chinese diaspora in Japan, though foreign nationals comprise just 2 percent of Japan’s population—much lower than in Germany (15 percent) or the United Kingdom (13 percent). Nevertheless, this figure is growing, and at nearly 800,000, the Chinese population represents one-third of foreigners in Japan. The CCP works to shape opinion in this community through state-sponsored messaging and Chinese-language media outlets, such as Japan Overseas Chinese News, Live Japan, Xiaochun, Modern China, Japan Overseas Chinese Daily News (Duan News), and Chubun News. These outlets pull content directly from mainland Chinese state-media sources, such as Xinhua and the *People’s Daily*. Chubun News, the most widely read CCP

affiliate in Japan, is known to publish articles that toe the CCP line, such as one promoting
Japanese involvement in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).33

A major target of Chinese influence through the media is Okinawa, a Japanese prefecture in
the East China Sea to which China has laid claim since at least 2013, when such an argument
appeared in the CCP state media outlet the People’s Daily.34 Annual reports from Japan’s Public
Security Intelligence Agency in 2015 and 2017 describe how CCP-affiliated media has sought
to drum up separatist sentiment in Okinawa, including by referring to the island according to
its former name, “Ryukyu,” as a means of challenging Japanese sovereignty.35

Instances of corruption involving Chinese influence demonstrate Beijing’s willingness to
resort to sharper forms of influence to achieve its strategic aims. In 2012, Justice Minister
Keishuu Tanaka resigned from the Noda administration after it was revealed Tanaka had
political ties to the Yakuza and had accepted funds from a Chinese national. In a more
notorious scandal in 2019, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) politician Tsukasa Akimoto
was arrested for allegedly accepting 3.7 million yen ($33,000) in bribes from China’s
online sports gambling service provider, 500.com, one of whose major shareholders is
a government-backed chipmaker with ties to Tsinghua University, a state institution.36

While China-linked bribery scandals are rare in Japan, economic interconnectedness could
create increased opportunities for corruption.

33. “Will Japan eventually abandon the United States to join the Asian Investment Bank?,” Chubun, April 10, 2015,
34. Bloomberg, “China questions Okinawa ownership,” Japan Times, May 8, 2013,
https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/05/08/national/china-questions-okinawa-ownership/#.Xu-uDWpKjMI
35. Ministry of Justice (Japan), Annual Report 2016 Review and Prospects of Internal and External Situations (Tokyo:
36. Ibid.
China’s influence tool kit includes other coercive measures, including “hostage diplomacy.” Under a 2014 anti-espionage law, China has detained numerous Japanese nationals, including Nobu Iwatani, an influential China scholar at Hokkaido University. But these coercive tactics have done more harm than good, eroding public trust in China and leading many Japanese scholars to cancel their research trips to China.

In sum, China’s traditional public diplomacy efforts have done little to change sentiment or public policy in Japan, while its more coercive and malign attempts to influence Japan more often than not have backfired, further eroding public trust in China.

**Vulnerabilities**

Japan is unique in its comparative immunity to Chinese influence operations, boasting a far greater number of resiliency factors than vulnerabilities. This resiliency derives in part from Japan’s long history of geopolitical confrontation with China, which inclines the Japanese public toward a natural skepticism of Chinese influence. Relations between the two countries continue to be defined by a legacy of armed conflicts beginning in 663AD and extending through the World War II. Following a period of relative harmony, the 2010 to 2012 conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and a resulting decision by China (although Beijing denies it) to stop exports of rare earth metals to Japan have once again elevated the security dimension of the relationship.

Another source of resilience is Japan’s legacy of moderating its exposure to foreign migration and investment. Many Japanese describe their country as having a “Galapagos syndrome,” an “expression that captures its relative cultural, economic, and linguistic
Japan's aversion to foreign investment has traditionally manifested in stringent regulation; industry protections that prohibit majority foreign ownership, stemming in part from a fear that foreign owners would not adhere to lifetime employment norms; and high labor and land prices. This legacy of economic isolationism is slowly ebbing under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe but remains a major source of inoculation against Chinese influence. Inbound foreign direct investment (FDI) in Japan was $10.4 billion in 2017, which is not even among the world’s top 20 countries, and China’s investment in Japan in 2017 remained below $600 million, less than that of smaller economies such as Singapore and Taiwan.

Furthermore, Japan’s political stability, reinforced by an apathetic public and low civic engagement, narrows the space for election interference and elite capture. With only two short hiatuses, the ruling LDP has controlled government since 1955, minimizing the return on foreign political meddling efforts. Japan is now ranked near the bottom (36 out of 40) among Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries for civic engagement, and the voter turnout rate has declined from 73 percent in 1990 to just 48 percent in 2019.

While there is a growing number of Chinese students and tourists in Japan and while Chinese represent the largest portion of the country’s foreign population, Japan’s cultural and demographic homogeneity presents few opportunities for China to exert influence through diaspora communities. Among OECD countries, Japan is ranked near the bottom among rich countries for the proportions of foreign born (1.9 percent), immigrants (1.76 percent), and refugees admitted (only 22 total in 2018).

Japan also derives resiliency from its media environment, including restraints on the free press resulting from the strong influence of Japan’s exclusive press clubs and the enactment of the 2013 State Secrecy Law, which punishes leaks of sensitive information. Five Japanese media conglomerates dominate mainstream print and broadcast media. This centralized, oligopolistic press environment limits the views represented, but allows for few openings for foreign media to influence political discourse.

Japan remains highly insulated from foreign political influence in great part due to strict campaign finance restrictions against foreign funding based on the 1948 Political Funds Control Act. This law prohibits donations from foreign nationals, corporations, and any

majority with majority foreign ownership. It has served as a model of sorts for other Western democracies who in recent years have strengthened regulations limiting foreign political contributions.

Japan: Opinions on China


**China’s Impact**

Japan has proven resilient to Chinese influence due to a variety of factors, including strict campaign finance rules, political and cultural homogeneity, relative historic isolation, an oligopolistic media landscape, and popular suspicion toward China stemming from a long history of conflict.

Australia has more leverage points, which China has skillfully exploited. These include deep economic ties, a relatively large ethnic Chinese community, and ongoing strategic debates about Australia’s relationship with China and the United States. However, similar to the United Kingdom, a wave of highly publicized scandals focused attention on the threat of malign foreign influence and ignited a robust public response. Legislation to crack down on foreign interference was passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, and further steps have been taken to implement and enforce new regulations. Despite its vulnerabilities, Australia’s democratic political culture has proven resilient to Beijing’s expanding attempts to influence its political environment.
Analysis

The four cases reveal important differences in the strategic aims and methods employed by Russia and China in their influence operations. For Russia, the goal is often the opportunistic disruption of domestic politics, the division of U.S. and European alliances, and the delegitimization of democratic institutions. This leads Moscow to strike on targeted issues, such as promoting the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom and fueling anti-immigrant sentiment in Germany. But the case of Germany also demonstrates that Russia’s influence strategy goes beyond mere tactical activities to long-term and strategic investments such as elite cultivation. China plays a long investment game as well, but it has focused its influence activities, until recently, on shaping positive narratives of China that will advance cooperative relations with key countries and stifle critical voices. To this end, the Chinese regime seeks to penetrate the politics and societies of target countries at every level by investing in long-term relationships and building networks of dependence.

Despite these substantial investments, our research concluded that neither Moscow nor Beijing were able to fully accomplish their strategic objectives through malign influence efforts, although perceptions and events were certainly shaped by their influence. The one exception to this is the amplification of the societal divisions related to Brexit, where Russian influence was one contributing factor to the pro-Brexit electoral outcome, among a host of other stronger and non-Russia related factors. Nevertheless, a lingering public perception that Russian influence had an outsized effect on a generationally decisive issue is an accomplishment in and of itself. In contrast, Russian efforts in Germany have mostly fallen short, as have China’s influence efforts in Japan and to some extent in Australia. Indeed, public opinion in all four case study countries suggest that Chinese and Russian malign influence efforts have had an adverse impact on Moscow and Beijing’s reputation, with a growing percentage of citizens negatively viewing China, in both Japan and Australia, and Russia, in the United Kingdom and even Germany, where in 2017 only 35 percent of Germans polled thought Russia was a constructive state actor.

This finding seems inconsistent with the international exposure and visibility of Russian influence activities in particular as well as other research into growing Russian and Chinese “sharp power” influence in Europe and Latin America.41

Ultimately, the impact of Moscow and Beijing’s influence efforts in the four cases examined was determined primarily by democratic features and societal traits within the target countries themselves as well as their historical and economic relationship with Beijing or Moscow. Several variables that played an outsized role, however, are worth noting.

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**Historical linkages and the presence of an empathetic overseas or diaspora community** were important factors in shaping the tactics as well as the impact of Russian and Chinese efforts. In Germany, the prevalence of sympathetic views toward Russia based on close historical ties amplified Russian influence, although paradoxically this familiarity has also contributed to blunting the effects of Russian efforts at disruption. The large Russian diaspora in the former East Germany is a target of Moscow’s influence efforts and has been sympathetic to Moscow-backed narratives, although this has not decisively shaped political dynamics within Germany. By contrast, the United Kingdom’s historical animosity with Russia and its experience of decades of pervasive Russian espionage activities have generated distrust among the British public; as such, the well-integrated Russian diaspora community in the United Kingdom has not played a significant role in Russian malign influence efforts.

The CCP has placed an especially high degree of focus on cultivating overseas Chinese communities around the world, an effort that has intensified under Xi Jinping. Australia has a relatively large Chinese diaspora community that has been a natural target for CCP influence activities, and Beijing’s success in coopting and controlling many of the community organizations and Chinese-language media has been an important vector for spreading pro-Beijing narratives and influence as well as silencing dissent. Unlike the overseas Russian community in Germany, Australia’s ethnic Chinese community is well integrated politically and economically in Australia, which has increased the value to Beijing of cultivating this community. By contrast, Japan’s cultural homogeneity and very small Chinese diaspora community limits this avenue for CCP influence. Similar to the United Kingdom, Japan’s long history of conflict with China creates natural suspicion toward Beijing among the public at large and within the political class.

In addition to diaspora communities, both Moscow and Beijing have sought to target **social cleavages** and **political polarization** to advance certain key narratives (in the case of China) or to **disrupt and delegitimize democratic institutions** (in the case of Russia). Japan, with its high levels of cultural and ethnic homogeneity and minimal political polarization after years of one-party dominance, is least susceptible to these kind of polarizing tactics. In the case of Australia, Beijing has sought to use race and ethnicity as a wedge to both demand loyalty from ethnic Chinese Australians and to avoid
public scrutiny of China’s policies and conduct in Australia. Beijing has also sought to capitalize on the deep vein of skepticism toward the U.S. alliance in Australian strategic and political circles, similar to Russia’s effort to exploit Germany’s desire for equidistance from and skepticism toward a U.S.-centered international system. China’s efforts to create a partisan divide in Australia on China and U.S.-alliance issues have, however, fallen short, as the Labor and Liberal Parties have become more unified in their approach to Chinese interference and recent overt economic bullying. Russian influence activities and disinformation tactics have been more successful in exploiting and amplifying anti-elite sentiments and immigration fears and have exacerbated political polarization in the United Kingdom and Germany.

A country’s regulatory environment was critical to mitigate the effects of Chinese and Russian influence activities and increasingly whether the country viewed these regulations through a national security lens rather than simple domestic compliance.

**Strict and transparent campaign finance regulation,** as in Japan and Germany, shielded democracies against foreign political influence and minimized opportunity for elite capture. A loophole in UK campaign finance law that does not require the disclosure of political donations from the beneficial owners of non-British companies incorporated in the European Union is suspected to have permitted Russian money to flow to the Leave campaign. In Australia, lax campaign finance laws allowed CCP-linked money to flow to individual politicians and political parties, leading to the national scandal around Sam Dastyari, a Labor Party senator who delivered Beijing-friendly talking points on the South China Sea flanked by his political patron, the wealthy Chinese businessman Huang Xiangmo. The revelations of Chinese influence in Australian politics led the government to enact a 2018 law banning foreign political donations.

**A stricter regulatory environment and greater transparency and monitoring of social media platforms** mitigate Russian and Chinese influence activities, but they can also represent a double-edged sword when Russia and China exploit democratic free-speech requirements to pursue their malign influence activities. This was particularly true in the United Kingdom, where a regulator imposed restrictions on RT and RT subsequently sued to protect its “free speech.” Equally, an overly regulated space, such as strict libel laws in the United Kingdom and Australia, give foreign influence agents legal ground to sue those calling attention to malign influence activities such as investigative journalists and scholars. Resistance to more strict regulatory regimes can also come from within: Germany’s Network Enforcement Act, among the most stringent social media regulations of any Western state, has faced criticism from social media companies and civil society groups over the transfer of responsibility for content moderation to the companies themselves and for the chilling effects of the law on free speech. In Japan and in Germany, a slower shift to digital and online news and a press environment that favors more established players create fewer opportunities for foreign manipulation of social media. In Australia, disinformation propagated through social media has not been a major component of the CCP’s influence operations to date.

42. Mankoff, *With Friends Like These*, 29.
A vibrant free press has proven to be critical in these democracies in exposing the full extent of malign interference activities by foreign authoritarian governments and launching national debates around how to best respond. Media investigations were especially important in Australia and the United Kingdom and helped drive a robust policy response. Democracies with high trust in traditional media appear less vulnerable to information manipulation, as the cases of Germany and Japan in particular illustrate. At the same time, the more diversified media ecosystem in the United Kingdom proved to be a vulnerability that was exploited by Russian disinformation operations, as compared to the more ideologically unified press environment of Japan or Germany’s more consolidated media market and corporatist mindset, where the reach of RT Deutsch and Sputnik is limited.

Finally, an asymmetric economic relationship between targeted countries and Russia or China offers points of leverage that can be used to influence political leaders and business elites, whether through overt coercion or more subtle forms of economic inducements and intimidation. China buys about one-third of what Australia sells to the world and is by far the largest source of tourists and international students, which creates a strong business and university constituency advocating for cooperative relations with Beijing. Similarly, in Germany, despite the overall low salience of Russia for the economy as a whole, several large, politically connected German firms doing business in Russia have called for sanctions relaxation, while the influential Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations advocates for broader reconciliation between Moscow and Berlin. These create natural avenues for Russian influence. Japan’s low levels of inbound FDI (globally and in particular from China) inoculates it against Chinese influence even while Japan has become increasingly reliant on China as a source of foreign students, tourists, and parts suppliers to the Japanese manufacturers, which will pose a challenge in the future. In the United Kingdom, low levels of trade with Russia create fewer avenues for Russia to exercise influence through business links, but it attempts to compensate with using the United Kingdom’s financial system and targeted ownership of media to influence the broader debate.
Recognise disinformation

- What are the objectives of disinformation?
- What are the techniques of disinformation?
- How does disinformation combine techniques to achieve an impact?

Situational insight

- What is insight in the context of disinformation and how should it be used to support a timely response to disinformation?

Strategic communication

- What should a public response to disinformation look like?
- What is the sign-off process?
- What are the available options for responding?

Early warning

- How do I focus digital monitoring on my priorities?
- How do I build a digital monitoring toolbox?
- How can I use digital monitoring to assess potential threats and vulnerabilities?

Impact analysis

- What is the likely goal of the disinformation?
- What is the likely impact of the disinformation?
- What is the likely reach of the disinformation?
- How should I prioritise the disinformation?

Track outcomes

- How should I record and share information about the disinformation campaign?
- How can I evaluate my actions and understand the lessons learned?

Conclusion

Chinese and Russian influence activities that seek to exploit democratic vulnerabilities in order to manipulate policies, politics, and societies are on the rise. Yet the impact of these malign influence activities has been muted thus far and determined largely by political, social, and economic features of the target countries themselves. Societal cohesion and political consensus are among the most important features that inoculate democratic polities against the impact of malign influence, and actions taken by governments to counter interference and disinformation efforts can play an important role in mitigating the impact. Diversified economic relations can also reduce vulnerabilities to Russian and Chinese malign influence.

With their heavily censored and restricted civil societies at home, China and Russia exploit the asymmetry of democratic systems by targeting open information environments, freedom of expression, participatory civic discourse, and pluralistic and fluid politics. Democracies have unique vulnerabilities to malign influence activities, but they also have unique and durable strengths. Transparency, rule of law, a free press, and democratic norms—hallmarks of democratic states—foster resilience against malign foreign influence. In the near term, it may be more important for democracies to redouble their efforts to build up their strengths than to reduce their vulnerabilities.

Exposing foreign malign influence efforts can ignite a strong public and policy response, and while deepening awareness and understanding of authoritarian malign influence is an important step, democratic countries must not be complacent. China and Russia continue to adapt and refine their efforts by leveraging new technologies and techniques to exploit democratic vulnerabilities, and they are learning from each other. Evidence from China’s diplomatic response to the Covid-19 pandemic suggests that Beijing is emulating Russian tactics in the information space, including creating fake social media accounts, spreading misleading reports and conspiracy theories to raise doubts and confusion about the origins of the virus, and discrediting the public health responses of many countries.

In one notable example reminiscent of Russian health disinformation tactics, Chinese foreign ministry deputy spokesperson Zhao Lijian retweeted a conspiracy spread by official Chinese state media that the virus originated in a U.S. military lab.\(^{43}\)

In the near term, it may be more important for democracies to redouble their efforts to build up their strengths than to reduce their vulnerabilities.

But just as China is learning from Russia, democracies under threat from malign influence can also learn from one another. Australia, for example, has taken a lead role in organizing discussions among like-minded democracies to share assessments of the threat of malign Chinese interference. It has also established a task force, informed by its observations of what is happening globally, to counter foreign disinformation around election campaigns—even though, to date, Australia has not been targeted by Russian or Chinese disinformation on social media. Japan’s measures to scrutinize foreign investment in order to minimize outside influence, including limiting foreign ownership of and investment in sensitive industries, have recently gained some traction in Europe. Germany’s stringent laws regulating social media may not translate easily into other legislative environments but may provide a model for shifting the responsibility of moderating false or misleading content on to social media companies. U.S. companies such as Twitter have begun to take note. A robust UK effort to increase transparency around foreign money via open registers of beneficial ownership provides a potential model for the United States and other countries, but more must be done globally to enhance transparency and prevent illicit financing in all of its manifestations. Increasing this cooperation, finding common approaches to countering malign influence activities, reducing societal polarization, and strengthening democratic institutions are the best ways to ensure that Chinese and Russian influence activities continue to fall short of their goals.

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