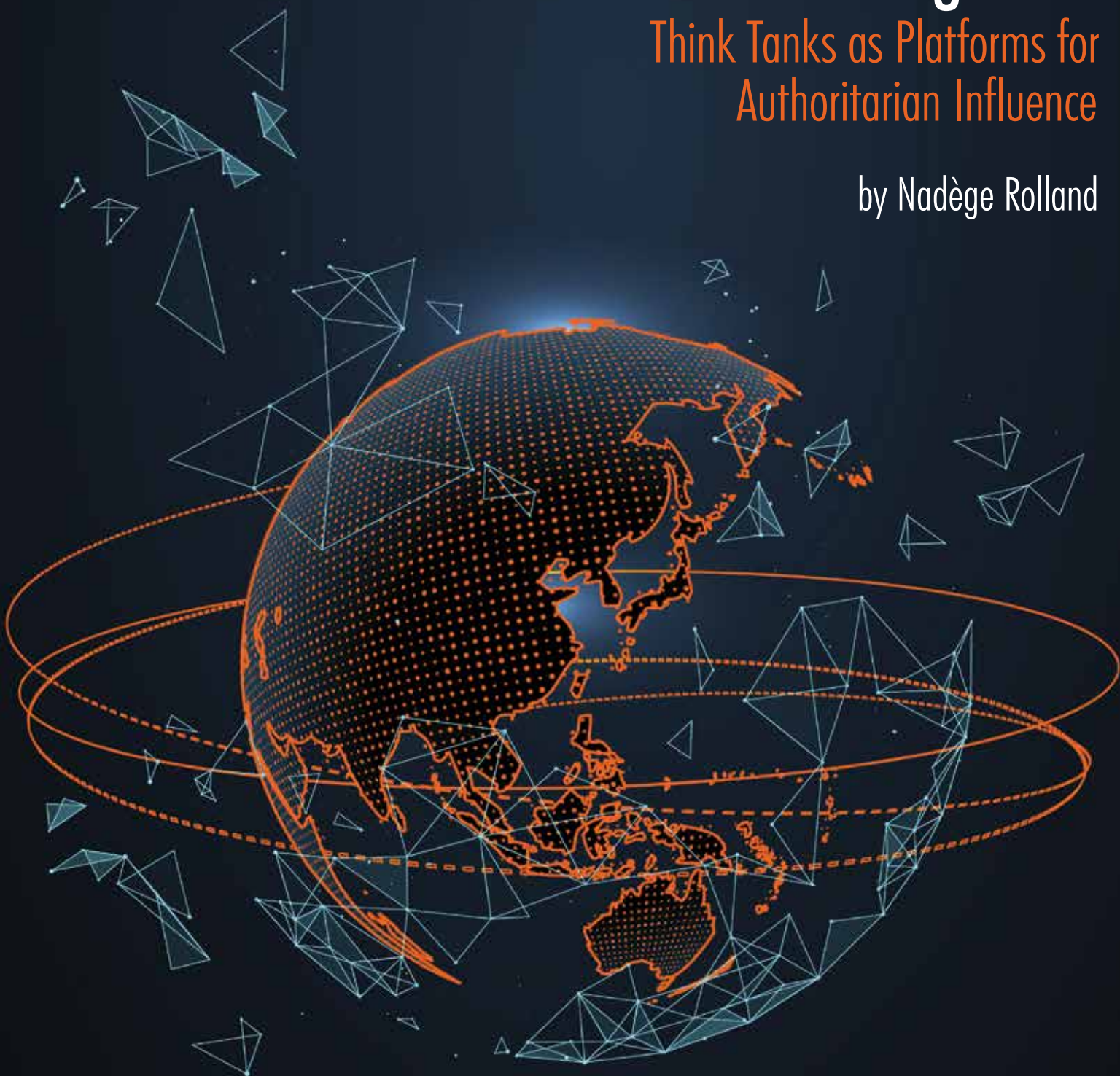


# Commanding Ideas

## Think Tanks as Platforms for Authoritarian Influence

by Nadège Rolland



National Endowment  
for Democracy  
*Supporting freedom around the world*

*forum*  
International Forum for Democratic Studies

## ABOUT THE SHARP POWER AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE SERIES

As globalization deepens integration between democracies and autocracies, the compromising effects of sharp power—which impairs free expression, neutralizes independent institutions, and distorts the political environment—have grown apparent across crucial sectors of open societies. The Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience series is an effort to systematically analyze the ways in which leading authoritarian regimes seek to manipulate the political landscape and censor independent expression within democratic settings, and to highlight potential civil society responses.

This initiative examines emerging issues in four crucial arenas relating to the integrity and vibrancy of democratic systems:

- Challenges to free expression and the integrity of the media and information space
- Threats to intellectual inquiry
- Contestation over the principles that govern technology
- Leverage of state-driven capital for political and often corrosive purposes

The present era of authoritarian resurgence is taking place during a protracted global democratic downturn that has degraded the confidence of democracies. The leading authoritarians are challenging democracy at the level of ideas, principles, and standards, but only one side seems to be seriously competing in the contest.

Global interdependence has presented complications distinct from those of the Cold War era, which did not afford authoritarian regimes so many opportunities for action within democracies. At home, Beijing, Moscow, and others have used twenty-first-century tools and tactics to reinvigorate censorship and manipulate the media and other independent institutions. Beyond their borders, they utilize educational and cultural initiatives, media outlets, think tanks, private sector initiatives, and other channels of engagement to influence the public sphere for their own purposes, refining their techniques along the way. Such actions increasingly shape intellectual inquiry and the integrity of the media space, as well as affect emerging technologies and the development of norms. Meanwhile, autocrats have utilized their largely hybrid state-capitalist systems to embed themselves in the commerce and economies of democracies in ways that were hardly conceivable in the past.

The new situation requires going beyond the necessary but insufficient tools of legislation, regulation, or other governmental solutions. Democracies possess a critical advantage that authoritarian systems do not—the creativity and solidarity of vibrant civil societies that can help safeguard institutions and reinforce democratic values. Thus, the papers in this series aim to contextualize the nature of sharp power, inventory key authoritarian efforts and domains, and illuminate ideas for non-governmental action that are essential to strengthening democratic resilience.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nadège Rolland** is senior fellow for political and security affairs at the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) and nonresident fellow at the Lowy Institute. Her research focuses mainly on China's grand strategy, foreign and defense policy, and the changes in regional and global dynamics resulting from the rise of China. Prior to joining NBR, Rolland was an analyst and senior adviser on Asian and Chinese strategic issues to the French Ministry of Defense. She is the author of the book *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (2017) and of several reports dedicated to Chinese elite thinking on BRI security and China's vision of a new world order.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The International Forum for Democratic Studies would like to recognize Mareike Ohlberg and Jonas Parello-Plesner for their valuable peer review, David Shullman for his helpful comments, Tyler Roylance for his outstanding editorial support, and the contributions of Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, Jessica Ludwig, Kevin Sheives, Cooper Hewell, Rachelle Faust, and others at the National Endowment for Democracy. The Forum also wishes to express its thanks to the Smith Richardson Foundation, which has provided critical financial support for this initiative.

***The views expressed in this paper represent the opinions and analysis of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for Democracy or its staff.***

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Think tanks first emerged out of a democratic political system that favors freedom of conscience and thought. They were designed to generate new ideas, provide objective research and analysis, and consider relevant policymaking questions without government direction. In recent years, however, authoritarians have rapidly grasped the potential value of think tanks as conduits for influence abroad.

Seeking to engineer a perception of global support for their political system and to shape a landscape that will be more favorable to their policies, talking points, and version of the truth, some authoritarian regimes—including those in Russia, China, and the Persian Gulf monarchies—have encouraged the creation of their own national think tanks.

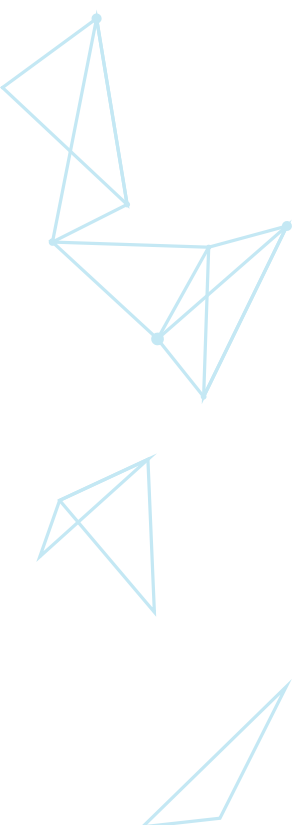
Just like their democratic counterparts, authoritarian think tanks organize public conferences and events, publish research in academic journals and on their websites, and share their analyses with media outlets. But the antiliberal and antidemocratic political systems to which these entities belong repress any form of dissent and claim control over the discursive and ideational space, undercutting the pretense of parity with their democratic counterparts. The overall effect is to lend authoritarians an artificial legitimacy—reinforcing the regime’s credibility by proxy. Viewed from an authoritarian perspective, think tanks are essential tools for propaganda.

This report describes the ways in which authoritarian countries seek to use think tanks as instruments of sharp power—focusing specifically on why and how authoritarian powers target foreign private organizations dedicated to policy-related research—and outlines steps that democratic think tanks and other civil society stakeholders can take to help restore democratic resilience and counter authoritarian attempts to undermine intellectual freedom.

- Think tanks in open societies should develop a healthy habit of **proactive due diligence**, searching carefully for any potential conflicts of interest. The correlations among sponsor, research project, and output are not always straightforward.
- Think tanks in democratic settings must develop and follow **strict codes of conduct** when it comes to their relationships with authoritarian actors. They should also be expected to publicly disclose all of their sponsors with corresponding donation amounts, and to commit not to sign any secret agreements.
- Private foundations and philanthropists in democratic countries should **prioritize funding for think tanks that abide by strict codes of conduct** governing potential relationships with authoritarian-linked entities.
- Think tanks in democratic countries should also proactively **engage with rising think tank professionals from emerging democracies** in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and South and Southeast Asia to offset the draw of authoritarian alternatives.
- The media and activist groups can play a critical role in **raising public awareness** and **informing and educating broader constituencies** about the nature and tactics of authoritarian think tanks—and the risks they pose to independent inquiry.

The stakes for democratic security could not be higher. Authoritarian regimes are engaged in purposeful, determined, and relentless efforts to shape and manipulate the ideas space through think tanks as platforms for influence.





**T**hink tanks first emerged out of a democratic political system that favors freedom of conscience and thought. They were designed to generate new ideas, provide objective research and analysis, and consider relevant policymaking questions without government direction. Their ability to voice independent opinions stems from the pluralism that is inherent to open societies.

The notion that authoritarian powers would take an interest in developing think tanks therefore sounds like an oxymoron: how could independent ideas thrive and be expressed under the rule of a despotic regime that imposes intellectual orthodoxy?

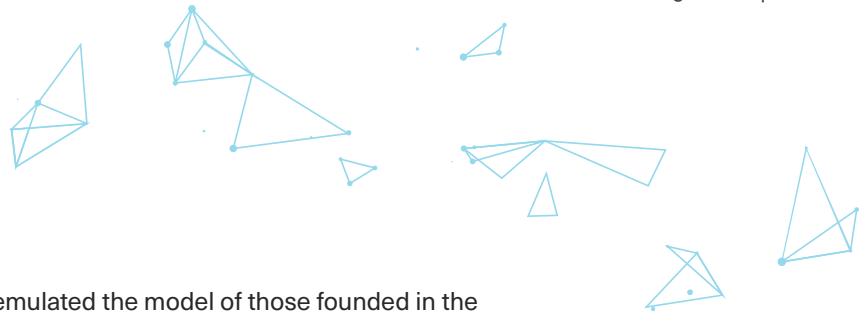
Some authoritarian governments have nonetheless encouraged the creation of their own national think tanks in recent years. Leaders who nurture geopolitical ambitions, in particular, have recognized the usefulness of expertise-based knowledge in informing their political decision-making on increasingly complex issues. Authoritarians have also acknowledged the value of international exchanges among think tanks that, unlike purely academic exchanges between universities, ultimately aim to influence policymaking in their respective countries. As they engage more proactively with the outside world in this way, authoritarians do not intend merely to participate in abstract debates or share their analyses to enrich collective knowledge. Rather, they seek to engineer a perception of global support for their political system and to shape a landscape that will be more favorable to their policies, talking points, and version of the truth. In other words, viewed from an authoritarian perspective, think tanks are essential propaganda tools.<sup>1</sup>

The organizations established by authoritarians introduce themselves as “think tanks,” donning a cloak of intellectual independence. But this is a case of misleading “faux amis.”<sup>2</sup> The antiliberal and antidemocratic political systems to which these entities belong repress any form of dissent and claim control over the discursive and ideational space, undercutting the pretense of parity with their democratic counterparts. An examination of how authoritarian powers use think tanks as platforms for influence leads one into Orwellian territory, where think tanks are not independent laboratories of ideas, foundations are not philanthropic enterprises, and research centers do not contribute to the enrichment of knowledge. Instead, they act as agents in the service of the authoritarian state.

This paper describes the ways in which authoritarian countries seek to use think tanks as instruments of “sharp power.” It focuses specifically on why and how authoritarian powers including Russia, China, and the Persian Gulf monarchies target foreign private organizations dedicated to policy-related research.<sup>3</sup> After addressing the authoritarians’ strategic objectives, the paper explores the mechanisms and preferred tools they use to reach their goals, then delves into China’s efforts to build influence through the creation of think tank networks under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The paper concludes with an assessment of the impact of such sharp power activities, and proposes options to help strengthen democratic resilience and counter authoritarian attempts to undermine intellectual freedom and research integrity.

**[Authoritarians] seek to engineer a perception of global support for their political system and to shape a landscape that will be more favorable to their policies, talking points, and version of the truth.**





## THINKERS IN THE SERVICE OF THE STATE

Many think tanks in liberal democracies today have emulated the model of those founded in the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century. The originals were created at the initiative of private philanthropists, lawyers, and scholars who sought to nurture informed analysis and address important policy issues outside of the government's purview.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, and unsurprisingly so, authoritarian powers do not have the same type of civil society-based think tank tradition.<sup>5</sup> They began to show an interest in establishing their own versions of think tanks only around the mid-2000s.

Faced with increasingly complicated governance and foreign policy challenges, authoritarian governments have gradually recognized the importance of professional expertise and analysis as a potential aid to their decision making. They have carefully encouraged the development of policy-relevant domestic expertise to improve their understanding of such topics as the economic consequences of the 2008–2009 global financial crisis or the impact of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings on the reconfiguration of regional politics. But contrary to their democratic counterparts, authoritarian regimes work to keep intellectual inquiry within strict boundaries and discourage any questioning of the official line—an approach at odds with the original vision of what a think tank should do. While they understand the benefits of expert analysis for their own domestic governance purposes, these regimes are also careful to ensure that the reports and opinions generated by think tanks never cast serious doubt on the merits and validity of their policies or pose a threat to their rule and legitimacy.

When the vast majority of think tanks are led by men who are personally close to the ruler, independence is hard to come by. For example, Turki bin Abdullah Aldakhil, the founder and chairman of Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Center in Dubai,<sup>6</sup> is a trusted aide to Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman and serves as the kingdom's current ambassador to the United Arab Emirates,<sup>7</sup> while Vladimir Yakunin, the founder of the Dialogue of Civilizations (DOC) Research Institute, is an “associate of Vladimir Putin and former Soviet diplomat rumored to have held a high rank in the KGB,” and has been subjected to U.S. sanctions.<sup>8</sup> In China, most think tanks are either built into or closely affiliated with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) organs and government agencies. Their research topics are framed by detailed guidelines and oriented to reflect governmental priorities.<sup>9</sup>

Authoritarians view think tanks not only as helpful to their own decision making, but also as useful channels of communication with their domestic public. Experts and scholars from these organizations regularly appear on local media programs, relaying positions and messages that closely toe the official line and lending regime narratives an air of academic respectability. The consultation of supposedly independent experts by local media, which are also tightly controlled by the government, in turn helps to project a false impression of diversity in the domestic policy debate. The overall effect is to add an artificial legitimacy to government policies, talking points, and agendas, essentially reinforcing the regime's credibility by proxy.

In parallel with the domestic rationale for creating and using think tanks, authoritarians have rapidly grasped the potential value of think tanks as conduits for influence abroad.<sup>10</sup> Whereas democracies may gain a soft power benefit from their independent think tanks, the authoritarian equivalents are very much an exercise of sharp power. They take advantage of the open systems of free societies by injecting fraudulent or misleading communications in order to shape foreign public perceptions, exert surreptitious influence, and serve ulterior objectives in the target countries.

Beijing encourages Chinese think tanks, for example, to participate in public diplomacy and help engineer a favorable environment on the global stage,<sup>11</sup> thus enhancing the country's "discourse power"—the ability to voice perspectives and concepts that will be accepted, internalized, and reproduced over time by others.<sup>12</sup> In this context, think tanks are seen by propagandists as useful tools for the "formation, dissemination, and persuasion of public opinion."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the Russian government's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept called for Russian academics and experts to contribute to the country's public diplomacy by engaging in "dialogue with foreign specialists on global politics and international security."<sup>14</sup> The fundamental purpose of authoritarian think tanks is evidently not to generate new knowledge or join in genuine intellectual debate, but rather to shape foreign perceptions.<sup>15</sup>

This can be done in several ways. The first is simply to deliver the regime's preferred version of the truth. Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept notes the necessity of providing the outside world with "unbiased" and "reliable information" and an "objective image" of Russia. CCP leader Xi Jinping regularly exhorts Chinese academics and journalists to "tell China's story well, and properly disseminate China's voice."<sup>16</sup> Both mean in effect that only the officially authorized version of reality is allowed to be spread.

In addition to shaping external perceptions by promoting a fabricated version of themselves in public debates, authoritarians use their think tanks to create and nurture relationships with foreign individuals and institutions that may be connected to policymaking and political circles.<sup>17</sup> For example, the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI), once part of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and now under the Russian presidential administration, has played an active role in cultivating local pundits in the Balkans and Scandinavia who serve as outspoken supporters of Russian actions in Ukraine's Donbas region.<sup>18</sup> In young democracies, where the practice of pluralism is relatively new, the public political debate in which think tanks take part is more vulnerable to this sort of hijacking and tilting in favor of voices who are quietly backed by powerful authoritarian actors.

Regular public engagements provide opportunities to connect directly with and potentially influence the views of a select audience, including civil society representatives interested in policy-related issues, parliamentary staffers, civil servants, and other government officials. These people may then include talking points provided by authoritarian think tankers in their own internal memos, reports, and policy recommendations. Partly due to a lack of familiarity with how authoritarian think tanks operate, foreign audiences may assume that the analyses shared by such entities are genuinely independent and therefore receive them with less skepticism than if the same ideas were transmitted by authoritarian government officials. While the messengers may differ, however, the messages are the same.

## THINK TANKS AND THE MECHANISMS OF SHARP POWER INFLUENCE

There is a deliberate method to influence building. Authoritarians do not wait passively for the presentations and publications of their think tank representatives to work their way into foreign governments' policy memos in the hope of eventually influencing their decisions. Instead, they use a wide array of tactics, sometimes in combination, to help propagate their narrative, ranging from a superficial level of engagement to the deep penetration of open societies. These activities can end up confining debates within a predetermined set of boundaries and presenting a selective picture of reality that favors the views of antidemocratic powers, while at the same time isolating or discrediting alternative ideas. Over time, they have adverse effects on democratic activity and pluralism.

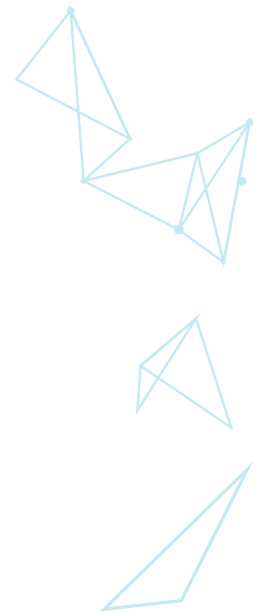
Just like their democratic counterparts, authoritarian think tanks organize public conferences and events, publish research in academic journals and on their websites, and share their analyses with media outlets. When they do so, however, they proactively set the agenda. Some topics are not discussed because they are deemed too sensitive for the regime, and the bulk of the discussion usually revolves around a limited package of preferred themes. Critical voices are ignored and not invited to speak at public events, while selected experts are given ample opportunities to comment on the regime's policies in the most favorable light. A conference organized in Yangon in January 2020 and cosponsored by Myanmar and China, for example, was primarily focused on the promotion of China as an indispensable political, economic, and strategic partner for Myanmar and gave multiple opportunities to CCP officials, rather than scholars, to deliver remarks.<sup>19</sup>

In the long run, this systematically selective engagement marginalizes entire segments of opinion and overcrowds debate with voices favorable to authoritarian objectives, with a cumulative effect that approximates censorship. The saturation of the public discussion is most achievable in environments where little or no independent expertise is available, the resources to amplify such expertise are limited, or the very concept of think tanks and independently formulated research and analysis is still relatively new. The activities of the Beijing-backed China-CEE Institute in Budapest are a good example of the technique of swamping the local discourse with prodigious output. In 2019 alone, the think tank hosted four international meetings, three workshops, and seven public lectures, and published ten working papers, eight books, and more than six hundred briefing papers. Its research products are generally uncritical of Chinese government projects like the BRI and emphasize the positive aspects of deepened cooperation with China without offering any counterpoint.<sup>20</sup>

Authoritarian countries sponsor foreign think tanks, although not necessarily with direct infusions of government money. A January 2020 report from Think Tank Watch found that of the top fifteen foreign governments donating to U.S. think tanks, only two are not democracies: the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.<sup>21</sup> In 2013, Qatar donated over \$14 million to the Brookings Institution to open a new center in Doha. Other Persian Gulf monarchies, in competition with Qatar for influence, followed suit with their own large donations to Washington think tanks and academic institutions.<sup>22</sup>

Most authoritarian funding to foreign research organizations is offered indirectly by wealthy business figures or nominally private conglomerates and foundations with close but not always obvious links to their home governments. For example, the think tank China Energy Fund Committee, headed by former Hong Kong home secretary Patrick Ho Chi-ping, was registered as a nonprofit organization in the United States. The organization was funded by CEFC China Energy, a conglomerate whose chairman, Ye Jianming, was detained in Shanghai in March 2018 on corruption charges. Through his think tank, Patrick Ho managed to forge deep ties to the United Nations and the international strategic affairs community. He sponsored and helped organize regular events with the Maryland-based Institute for the Analysis of Global Security (IAGS), which attracted former high-ranking American defense and intelligence officials. Ho's activities included outright corruption of foreign officials, for which he was arrested and sentenced by a New York court in 2019.<sup>23</sup>

**In the long run, this systematically selective engagement marginalizes entire segments of opinion and overcrowds debate with voices favorable to authoritarian objectives, with a cumulative effect that approximates censorship.**



The Hong Kong–based China–United States Exchange Foundation (CUSEF), which presents itself as an “independent, non-profit and non governmental foundation,”<sup>24</sup> has similar characteristics. It is headed by Tung Chee-hwa, a former Hong Kong chief executive who is also vice-chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), an official advisory body linked to the CCP’s United Front apparatus. CUSEF has cooperated on projects with various U.S. think tanks,<sup>25</sup> and it funds an internet platform that publishes articles in English promoting a “positive and peaceful relationship” between China and the United States.<sup>26</sup>

The financial transactions between think tanks and entities acting as proxies for authoritarian powers can be totally opaque. Polish investigative journalists in 2017 revealed, for example, that a 2013 payment of almost €21,000 to the European Center for Geopolitical Analysis had originated in Russia and was laundered through a British company.<sup>27</sup> The center’s president, Mateusz Piskorski, had long-standing ties to the Russian writer Alexander Dugin and was the leader of a short-lived pro-Russian political party in Poland, Zmiana.<sup>28</sup>

**Most authoritarian funding to foreign research organizations is offered indirectly by wealthy business figures or nominally private conglomerates and foundations with close but not always obvious links to their home governments.**

Authoritarian proxies can also coopt foreign experts and former officials working in think tanks by inviting them to deliver keynote speeches in international forums or conferences. They may offer speaking fees, along with a red-carpet, all-expenses-paid trip to an attractive destination. The annual Rhodes Forum, an offshoot of Vladimir Yakunin’s DOC Research Institute, attracts a number of statesmen and academics from democratic countries who, by their sheer reputation and presence, bolster the DOC’s international stature.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, not all foreign scholars and former officials who attend these events are necessarily compromised by material incentives. They may simply be willing to engage with authoritarian think tanks in order to maintain dialogue and contribute to better understanding between countries. Authoritarians can leverage these attitudes, especially when their relations with democratic governments are deteriorating. Under certain circumstances, such interactions can indeed provide a useful diplomatic back channel.<sup>30</sup>

Commissioned papers are helpful in funneling local insights and information on particular questions of interest to the authoritarian sponsor, sometimes verging on intelligence collection. The call for papers for the December 2017 16+1 Think Tank Network Symposium, a Chinese think tank–backed initiative in Central and Eastern Europe, specifically requested studies of the potential risks and legal obstacles for Chinese infrastructure investments in the region, as well as “attitudes of the EU and of main countries of the EU (i.e. Germany) towards the 16+1 cooperation.”<sup>31</sup>

In some cases, authoritarian governments have established their own institutes in foreign countries. Most of these do not publicly disclose the identity of their patrons or the amount of contributions they receive. Although they often fail to make their political sympathies explicit, their governmental and national links are usually unambiguous. One of the earliest examples of such think tanks is the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, established in Paris and New York in 2008 under the auspices of the Russian government.<sup>32</sup> Another Russian entity, Yakunin’s DOC Research Institute, was established in Berlin in 2016.<sup>33</sup> Beijing-backed think tanks inaugurated



abroad include the Institute for China-America Studies, which has kept a very low profile since its opening in Washington, D.C. in 2015.<sup>34</sup> The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences established the China-CEE Institute, China's first think tank in Europe, in Budapest in April 2017.<sup>35</sup> Also that year, several Persian Gulf monarchies established think tanks in Washington: the Qatar-America Institute, the Gulf International Forum (also linked to Qatar), and the Arabia Foundation (close to the Saudi government), which shut down in July 2019 in the wake of journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder by Saudi agents the previous fall.<sup>36</sup> Some of these entities included American university professors and former ambassadors on their advisory boards,<sup>37</sup> expanding into the international realm the earlier domestic pattern of using prominent intellectuals to lend credibility and legitimacy to the authoritarian regime.

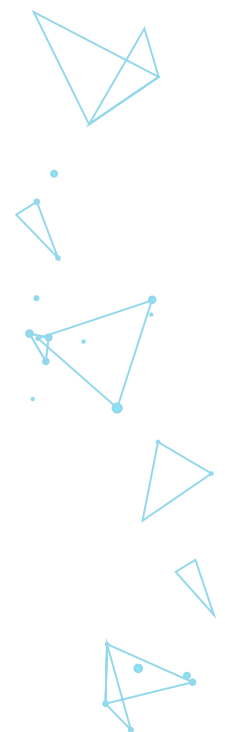
Of all the authoritarian states that have used think tanks as instruments of sharp power, China's government stands out as the one engaged in the broadest spectrum of activities across the largest geographic area, targeting not just leading democracies or its own neighbors, but the entire world.

## CHINA'S NETWORK OF NEW THINK TANKS

The Chinese government's activities in the think tank space must be understood in the broader context of its unique Leninist political system and its increasingly expansive foreign policy agenda, of which external propaganda and political influence (or "United Front") work are crucial elements. Both efforts are supported by an extensive array of organizations and tactics.

The development of think tanks in China has largely adhered to an academic tradition of subordination to or dependence on the state. As in Soviet Russia, China's research centers were from the 1950s onward directly controlled by and attached to the Communist Party or the state bureaucracy, including specific committees, ministries, and security agencies. But neither Mao Zedong nor Deng Xiaoping ever relied on them to inform their decision making. In the 1990s, Beijing allowed a small degree of openness, which led to the formation of a limited amount of civil society organizations and nongovernmental academic centers, mostly dedicated to research on economic issues. In the mid-2000s, CCP leader Hu Jintao, who had been president of the Central Party School, started to encourage input from Chinese intellectuals and experts to support policymaking, and regularly invited them to give lectures at Politburo Study Sessions.<sup>38</sup> Several new and allegedly nongovernmental research centers, such as the Center for China and Globalization and the Charhar Institute, emerged during the 2008–2009 global financial crisis. Rather than offering genuinely independent perspectives on issues ranging from economics to international relations, the entities were established to create a false impression of opinion pluralism under increasingly tight ideological control from the party-state.

Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012–2013 marked in many domains an acceleration and clarification of previously observable trends. Think tanks are no exception. At a December 2012 CCP economic work conference, Xi proposed establishing high-quality think tanks to serve policymaking. A year later, the third plenum of the Eighteenth CCP Congress passed a resolution to create "new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics."<sup>39</sup> Rather than inaugurating a flourishing new phase for independent Chinese think tanks, Xi's policies were intended to further tighten government controls. Beijing passed laws restricting foreign funding for domestic nongovernmental institutions,<sup>40</sup> and required that each think tank be placed under the strict purview of party-state entities.<sup>41</sup> Fu Ying, a distinguished Chinese foreign policy practitioner, explained that Chinese think tanks should "adhere to the Party leadership and serve the country" while at the same time being "independent and objective."<sup>42</sup> In this case, "independence" does not mean free from government control, but rather free from the influence of Western concepts and ideas that



the CCP considers threatening and subversive.<sup>43</sup> More autonomous organizations, including the widely respected Unirule Institute of Economics, have since been forced to close down.<sup>44</sup> The Unirule Institute of Economics—which had actively promoted China’s economic liberalization since its founding in 1993 and had tried to carve out a genuinely autonomous space for itself in an increasingly constricting environment—was locked out of its office in 2017 and eventually forced to close in 2019.<sup>45</sup>

Xi remains committed to transforming Chinese think tanks into instruments serving the policies of the party-state, and he specifically demands that they help expand the regime’s international influence and contribute to the realization of its main strategic objectives.<sup>46</sup> For the Chinese leadership, effectively disseminating the party’s concepts and enhancing the appeal of its model to the rest of the world are as crucial to China’s rise as its economic and military power.<sup>47</sup> Think tanks, like media, are seen as playing a major role in changing the way others, including democracies,<sup>48</sup> speak and think about China, its regime, and its policies.<sup>49</sup>

China stands alone among authoritarian powers with respect to the global scope of its international efforts. Beijing’s influence campaigns are also characteristically methodical, as illustrated by the development of international think tank “alliances” in support of the BRI, the sprawling program that has driven much of the country’s foreign policy activity since 2013. For the past five years, Chinese universities and think tanks have not only created new research centers dedicated to the development of expertise on Belt and Road countries, but have also proactively expanded their international outreach. Several BRI think tank cooperation platforms have been created under party-state auspices to serve as “thought producers, policy promoters, public opinion guides, information disseminators and consensus aggregators” around the BRI.<sup>50</sup> The most prominent platforms—the Belt and Road International Think Tank Cooperation Alliance, the Silk Road Think Tank Network (SiLKS), and the Belt and Road Studies Network—all acknowledge as their main purpose the need to “serve the development of the BRI.”<sup>51</sup> Other structures pre-dating the BRI, such as the China-Africa Think Tank Forum (CATTF, created in 2011), the China-Latin America and Caribbean Think Tanks Forum (2010), the China-South and Southeast Asia Think Tank Forum (2012), and the China-CEEC (or “17+1”) Think Tank Network (2015) also encourage joint policy research and training among think tanks, with the BRI high on their exchanges agenda.

**Xi remains committed to transforming Chinese think tanks into instruments serving the policies of the party-state. He specifically demands that they help expand the regime’s international influence and contribute to the realization of its main strategic objectives.**

These think tank alliances pursue two main goals. First, they seek to shape foreign perceptions and behaviors in a manner favorable to the Chinese leadership’s objectives, specifically the BRI, while at the same time inhibiting potential attempts to criticize or counter it. Joint events, exchanges, and publications provide countless channels of communication through which Beijing expects to enhance the “accurate understanding of the BRI” and “positive feelings” toward the initiative among foreign public intellectuals and the broader populations in their respective countries.<sup>52</sup> Second, the alliances aim to nurture present and future generations of China-friendly local elites. Regular engagements provide ample opportunities to identify and target key local public opinion leaders and future talents. Some of them can then “buttress the efforts” dedicated to the success of the BRI in their countries.<sup>53</sup> Rising elites working in local think tanks can be cultivated and eventually coopted through a mix of inducements including prestige, resources, and perceived access.

For young think tank professionals around the world, perhaps particularly in the developing world, Beijing's invitations to join all-expenses-paid study visits to China can be extremely appealing, especially when viewed against the limited exchange and cooperation opportunities afforded by major democracies. Throughout their stay in China and their interactions with Chinese representatives, the visitors will repeatedly be presented with an image of modernity, efficacy, and benevolence, setting the "China model" in contrast with an arrogant, aggressive, and chaotic West. This proactive approach may be quite effective in generating interest in, if not sympathy for, certain CCP narratives among young generations of future think tankers, whose role will be to advise their respective governments on policy related to China.<sup>54</sup>

## ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT AND WAYS FORWARD

The stakes for democratic security could not be higher. The purposeful, determined, and relentless efforts of authoritarian regimes to shape and manipulate the ideas space directly undermine the resilience of a core democratic principle—pluralism.

Sharp power is as much about silencing criticism as it is about flooding the information landscape with authoritarian talking points. Due to the deliberately opaque nature of the relationships between authoritarians and the foreign think tanks they seek to coopt, one can rarely point to proof of a financial input resulting in outcomes that are favorable to the authoritarian sponsor. When the information about project funding is publicly available, it may be possible to reach a judgment after the fact about whether certain think tank outputs have been influenced by their authoritarian donors.<sup>55</sup> But it is far more difficult to determine what sorts of analyses might have been produced in the absence of authoritarian influence.<sup>56</sup>

The correlations among sponsor, research project, and output are not always straightforward. Some institutions may receive sizeable contributions from authoritarian powers, but this does not necessarily prevent individual scholars from criticizing their sponsors.<sup>57</sup> Friendly positioning or outputs favorable to authoritarian regimes may not even be linked to authoritarian sources of funding. China Matters, an Australian think tank funded by a combination of Australian government grants and donations from Australian business groups with interests in China, recently had its public funding cut amid foreign influence concerns.<sup>58</sup> As mentioned above, authoritarian governments do not always sponsor foreign think tanks directly, working instead through various proxies, such as individuals or foundations with no apparent official ties to the governments in question. Democratic think tanks should develop a healthy habit of proactive due diligence before they engage with such actors, searching carefully for any potential conflicts of interest.

Transparency remains a must. Think tanks in democratic countries should be expected to publicly disclose all of their sponsors with corresponding donation amounts, and to commit not to sign any secret agreements. If their sponsors are truly unproblematic, think tanks should not be uncomfortable about revealing the relationships. The obligation to publicly identify such links could encourage more scrupulous screening of potential partners, and perhaps also prompt internal discussions, reflection, and recalibration. Institutions that operate on the basis of independence from their own governments should certainly be willing to apply the same principle when it comes to their interactions with authoritarian states and their cutouts. They should naturally be amenable to the idea of independent research and critical thinking that are not compromised by foreign states' agendas. In particular, think tanks should develop and follow strict codes of conduct when it comes to their relationships with authoritarian actors. Think tanks in democratic countries could jointly sign an international pledge committing them to a common set of rules.

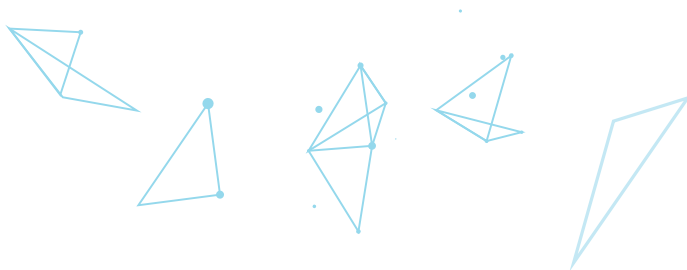
Democratic think tanks could also be more proactive in engaging with rising think tank professionals in regions like Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and South and Southeast Asia. They should more systematically consider giving these experts speaking and publishing opportunities to offset the draw of authoritarian alternatives. Many democratic think tanks' existing "young professionals" or "next generation" programs could be expanded to include more participants from countries other than their own.

Transparency and accountability among think tanks should be reinforced by the work of other civil society stakeholders, especially the media and nongovernmental organizations. Scrutiny from these actors can reveal instances of think tank impropriety that involve cooperation with authoritarian regimes, while at the same time helping to promote exemplary institutions that successfully avoid cooptation. In addition, the media and activist groups can play a critical role in raising public awareness by informing and educating broader constituencies about the nature and tactics of authoritarian think tanks.

Most democratic think tanks that engage with authoritarian counterparts do not do so with corrupt or malicious intent, but rather as part of an effort to improve mutual understanding. Such activities are perfectly legitimate and can be fruitful, so long as they are conducted with both caution and a full awareness of the identity and goals of the authoritarian-linked participants. Outright rejection of all such interactions is not required if the democratic parties have a proper understanding of how authoritarian think tanks operate. At a minimum, they should start by questioning these actors' links to the state. It is no longer tenable for democratic think tanks, academic centers, and individual researchers to ignore the reality of sharp power.

Unfortunately, some democratic think tanks may be tempted to engage with authoritarian partners because running research institutions is expensive, and funding sources for certain forms of expertise are scarce. It can be especially difficult to resist the lure of lucrative contracts with ostensibly private businessmen or foundations from authoritarian countries, when domestic donations, both public and private, are drying up. Private foundations and philanthropists in democratic countries should therefore be encouraged to prioritize funding for think tanks that abide by strict codes of conduct governing potential relationships with authoritarian-linked entities.

Authoritarian think tanks' success as sharp power instruments relies on deception. While they may present themselves as independent laboratories of ideas, their own governments view them as extensions of themselves—as subsidiaries with a duty to serve the regime's interests. The first step toward restoring democratic resilience in this sector is to understand such institutions for what they are.





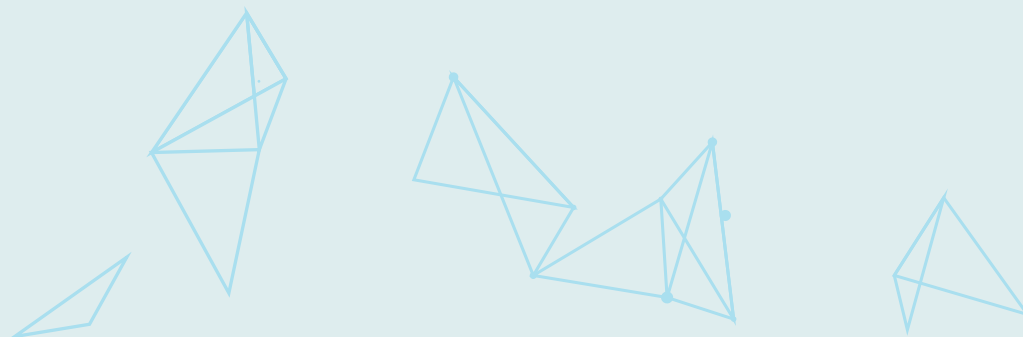
## ENDNOTES

- 1 Propaganda is not limited to overt praise of the regime but is aimed at improving its international image and influencing international public opinion. See for example Mareike Ohlberg, "Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (duiwai xuanchuan) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics," PhD thesis, University of Heidelberg, 6 March 2013, [http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/17289/1/Ohlberg\\_External-Propaganda.pdf](http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/17289/1/Ohlberg_External-Propaganda.pdf).
- 2 "Faux amis" (false friends) are words in a foreign language that bear a deceptive resemblance to words in one's own language. Martin Hála and Jichang Lulu use this apt image to describe how, in the Chinese context, seemingly familiar economic phenomena get mentally translated into their Western equivalents, leading to outright mischaracterizations of the Chinese party-state's actions. See Martin Hála and Jichang Lulu, "Lost in Translation: 'Economic Diplomacy' with Chinese Characteristics," *Sinopsis*, 11 March 2019, <https://sinopsis.cz/en/lost-in-translation-economic-diplomacy-with-chinese-characteristics>.
- 3 The report does not examine authoritarian efforts targeted at university laboratories and centers devoted to the hard sciences and technology-related research, which are usually associated with intellectual property theft and scientific, technological, and commercial espionage rather than an intent to restrict or influence intellectual inquiry. Please refer to Alex Joske's seminal study, "Picking flowers, making honey," for a detailed examination of Chinese military efforts to expand collaborative ties with research institutions outside China in order to access cutting-edge scientific and technological knowledge: Alex Joske, "Picking flowers, making honey: The Chinese military's collaboration with foreign universities," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 30 October 2018, [www.aspi.org.au/report/picking-flowers-making-honey](http://www.aspi.org.au/report/picking-flowers-making-honey). For an in-depth examination of how authoritarian sharp power challenges independent intellectual inquiry, including in universities and academic centers, see Glenn Tiffert, "Compromising the Knowledge Economy: Authoritarian Challenges to Independent Intellectual Inquiry," National Endowment for Democracy, May 2020, [www.ned.org/sharp-power-and-democratic-resilience-series-compromising-the-knowledge-economy](http://www.ned.org/sharp-power-and-democratic-resilience-series-compromising-the-knowledge-economy).
- 4 The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1910), the Hoover Institution (1919), the Brookings Institution (founded in 1916 as the Institute for Government Research), and the Council on Foreign Relations (1921). Project RAND/Project Air Force, established in 1946 by General H. H. "Hap" Arnold, was the first government "think tank" created to "retain the considerable benefits of civilian scientific thinking that had been demonstrated during World War II." See "About RAND," [www.rand.org/paf/about.html](http://www.rand.org/paf/about.html).
- 5 In communist countries during the Cold War, research and analytical centers were never independent, but embedded within the party or the state bureaucracy.
- 6 Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Center, <https://mesbar.org/about>.
- 7 Leela Jacinto, "New Saudi Envoy to UAE Was Privy to Khashoggi 'Bullet' Quip," *France 24*, 11 February 2019, [www.france24.com/en/20190211-saudi-arabia-ambassador-uae-khashoggi-bullet-crown-prince](http://www.france24.com/en/20190211-saudi-arabia-ambassador-uae-khashoggi-bullet-crown-prince).
- 8 Ben Knight, "Putin Associate Opens Russia-Friendly Think Tank in Berlin," *Deutsche Welle*, 1 July 2016, [www.dw.com/en/putin-associate-opens-russia-friendly-think-tank-in-berlin/a-19372110](http://www.dw.com/en/putin-associate-opens-russia-friendly-think-tank-in-berlin/a-19372110).
- 9 Hongying Wang and Xue Ying Hu, "The New Great Leap Forward: Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics," Centre for International Governance Innovation Papers No.142, 6 September 2017, [www.cigionline.org/publications/new-great-leap-forward-think-tanks-chinese-characteristics](http://www.cigionline.org/publications/new-great-leap-forward-think-tanks-chinese-characteristics).
- 10 "Xi Calls for a New Type of Think Tanks," *China Daily*, 27 October 2014, [www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-10/27/content\\_18810882.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-10/27/content_18810882.htm).
- 11 DD Wu, "What Kind of Think Tanks Does China Want to Establish?" *The Diplomat*, 5 May 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/what-kind-of-think-tanks-does-china-want-to-establish>.
- 12 For a thorough description of the notion of "discourse power," see Nadège Rolland, "China's Vision for a New World Order," National Bureau of Asian Research, 27 January 2020, [www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-vision-for-a-new-world-order](http://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-vision-for-a-new-world-order).
- 13 Wang Lili, "Jiaqiang 'zhiku gonggong waijiao' tisheng guojia huayuquan" [Strengthening 'Think Tank Public Diplomacy' to Enhance China's Discourse Power], Guangming Network Theory Channel, 26 December 2019, [https://theory.gmw.cn/2019-12/26/content\\_33431242.htm](https://theory.gmw.cn/2019-12/26/content_33431242.htm).
- 14 "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016," Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 December 2016, [www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk86BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk86BZ29/content/id/2542248).
- 15 Wang Lili, "Jianshe Zhongguo tese xinxing zhiku xu 'liangshou zhua'" [Building a New Type of Think Tank with Chinese Characteristics Requires 'Two Hands'] *Hongqi* [Red Flag] No.15, 2014.
- 16 David Bandurski, "The Fable of the Master Storyteller," China Media Project, 29 September 2017, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2017/09/29/the-fable-of-the-master-storyteller>.
- 17 Wang, "Strengthening 'Think Tank Public Diplomacy' to Enhance China's Discourse Power."
- 18 Mark Galeotti, "Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages Its Political War in Europe," European Council on Foreign Relations, 1 September 2017, [www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/controlling\\_chaos\\_how\\_russia\\_manages\\_its\\_political\\_war\\_in\\_europe](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/controlling_chaos_how_russia_manages_its_political_war_in_europe).
- 19 The event, entitled "Contemporary China and the World," was cosponsored by Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the China International Publishing Group (CIPG, also known as the China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration, is a branch of the CCP's Central Propaganda Department), the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS, a think tank affiliated with China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and the Chinese embassy. Xu Lin, deputy director of the CCP Central Propaganda Department and minister of the State Council Information Office of China, and Du Zhanyuan, president of the China Publishing Group, were among the conference's keynote speakers. See "A Dialogue Between Chinese and Myanmar Think Tanks Held and Exchange of Views Under the Title 'Contemporary China and the World,'" Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 14 January 2020, <https://www.myanmarisis.org/events/85>.



- 20 David Bandurski, "Guanxi Matters: China's New Think Tanks in Europe," *Echo Wall*, 2 March 2020, [www.echo-wall.eu/guanxi-matters/chinas-new-think-tanks-europe](http://www.echo-wall.eu/guanxi-matters/chinas-new-think-tanks-europe).
- 21 "New Study: Explosion of Foreign Funding at US Think Tanks," Think Tank Watch, 31 January 2020, [www.thinktankwatch.com/2020/01/new-study-explosion-of-foreign-funding.html](http://www.thinktankwatch.com/2020/01/new-study-explosion-of-foreign-funding.html).
- 22 Max Fisher, "How Saudi Arabia Captured Washington," *Vox*, 21 March 2016, [www.vox.com/2016/3/21/11275354/saudi-arabia-gulf-washington](http://www.vox.com/2016/3/21/11275354/saudi-arabia-gulf-washington).
- 23 Lucy Hornby, Don Weinland, and Nicolle Liu, "CEFC Think-Tank Head Patrick Ho Sentenced to 3 Years," *Financial Times*, 25 March 2019, [www.ft.com/content/ce7f0964-4ed3-11e9-b401-8d9ef1626294](http://www.ft.com/content/ce7f0964-4ed3-11e9-b401-8d9ef1626294).
- 24 "Who We Are," China–United States Exchange Foundation, [www.cusef.org.hk/en/who-we-are/about-us](http://www.cusef.org.hk/en/who-we-are/about-us).
- 25 Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "This Beijing-Linked Billionaire Is Funding Policy Research at Washington's Most Influential Institutions," *Foreign Policy*, 28 November 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/28/this-beijing-linked-billionaire-is-funding-policy-research-at-washingtons-most-influential-institutions-china-dc>.
- 26 "About Us," China-US Focus, [www.chinausfocus.com/html/aboutus.html](http://www.chinausfocus.com/html/aboutus.html).
- 27 Jacek Kucharczyk, "Exploiting Political Polarization in Poland," in Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, eds., "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence," National Endowment for Democracy, December 2017, [www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Chapter4-Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence-Poland.pdf](http://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Chapter4-Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence-Poland.pdf).
- 28 Yaroslav Shimov, "E-mail Hack Gives Glimpse Into Russia's Influence Drive in Eastern Europe," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 11 March 2017, [www.rferl.org/a/russia-e-mail-hack-belarusian-usorsky-piskorski-dugin/28363888.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-e-mail-hack-belarusian-usorsky-piskorski-dugin/28363888.html).
- 29 Casey Michel, "Clinton Official Pulls Out of Putin's Crony Vanity Project," *Daily Beast*, 25 September 2019, [www.thedailybeast.com/clinton-official-james-rubin-pulls-out-of-putin-crony-vladimir-yakunins-vanity-project](http://www.thedailybeast.com/clinton-official-james-rubin-pulls-out-of-putin-crony-vladimir-yakunins-vanity-project).
- 30 This seems to have been the case especially after international sanctions against Russia. See Kateryna Smagliy, "Hybrid Analytica: Pro-Kremlin Expert Propaganda in Moscow, Europe and the U.S.: A Case Study on Think Tanks and Universities," Institute of Modern Russia, October 2018, 8.
- 31 "Call for Papers: The 4th High-Level Symposium of Think Tank," 17 July 2017, [https://en.17plus1-thinktank.com/article/295.html?source=article\\_link](https://en.17plus1-thinktank.com/article/295.html?source=article_link).
- 32 "The Institute for Democracy and Cooperation: Russia's New Face to the World," Cable 08MOSCOW375\_a, 12 February 2008, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08MOSCOW375\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08MOSCOW375_a.html). For more about its New York branch, see Nikola Krastev, "In the Heart of New York, Russia's 'Soft Power' Arm Gaining Momentum," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 15 February 2009, [www.rferl.org/a/In\\_The\\_Heart\\_Of\\_New\\_York\\_Russias\\_Soft\\_Power\\_Arm\\_Gaining\\_Momentum/1493429.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/In_The_Heart_Of_New_York_Russias_Soft_Power_Arm_Gaining_Momentum/1493429.html).
- 33 Michel, "Clinton Official Pulls Out of Putin Crony's Vanity Project"; Nikita Jolkver, "What You Need to Know About a Putin Supporter's Think Tank in Berlin," *Deutsche Welle*, 18 September 2018, [www.dw.com/en/what-you-need-to-know-about-a-putin-supporters-think-tank-in-berlin/a-45548703](http://www.dw.com/en/what-you-need-to-know-about-a-putin-supporters-think-tank-in-berlin/a-45548703).
- 34 Isaac Stone-Fish, "Beijing Establishes a D.C. Think Tank, and No One Notices," *Foreign Policy*, 7 July 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/07/beijing-establishes-washington-dc-think-tank-south-china-sea>.
- 35 For a detailed study of the China-CEE think tank, see Bandurski, "Guanxi Matters: China's New Think Tanks in Europe."
- 36 Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian and Rhys Dubin, "Qatar's Ramped-Up Lobbying Efforts Find Success in Washington," *Foreign Policy*, 6 February 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/06/qatars-ramped-up-lobbying-efforts-find-success-in-washington>.
- 37 Alex Gangitano, "Pro-Saudi Arabia Think Tank Abruptly Closes in Washington," *The Hill*, 1 August 2019, <https://thehill.com/business-a-lobbying/455756-questions-about-funding-looms-over-pro-saudia-arabia-think-tank-closure>.
- 38 "Think Tanks in China: Growing Influence and Political Limitations," Brookings Institution, 23 October 2008, [www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/20091023\\_china.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/20091023_china.pdf).
- 39 Liu Xizhong, "Xinxing zhiku tuidong guojia zhili xiandaihua de duochong weidu" [New Think Tanks Promote Multidimensional National Governance Modernization], *Guangming Ribao*, 9 December 2019, [www.gstheory.cn/lwx/2019-12/09/c\\_1125324421.htm](http://www.gstheory.cn/lwx/2019-12/09/c_1125324421.htm); Joel Wuthnow and Chen Dingding, "China's 'New Type' Private Think Tanks: Is 'New' Better?," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 25, no. 2 (June 2020).
- 40 Josh Chin, "New Chinese Law Puts Foreign Nonprofits in Limbo," *Wall Street Journal*, 14 December 2016, [www.wsj.com/articles/foreign-nonprofits-brace-for-new-regulations-in-china-1481735054](http://www.wsj.com/articles/foreign-nonprofits-brace-for-new-regulations-in-china-1481735054).
- 41 "China to Introduce Dual-Management on Think Tanks," *Xinhua*, 4 May 2017, [www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/04/c\\_136257390.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/04/c_136257390.htm).

- 42 Fu Ying, "Guoji zhanlüe zhiku qidai 'zhuanxing geming'" [International Strategic Think Tanks Expect 'Transformation Revolution'], *People's Daily*, 15 April 2015, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2015/0415/c40531-26846624.html>.
- 43 Read, for example, the CCP's "Document 9: Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere," *ChinaFile*, 8 November 2013, [www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation](http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation), or Jude Blanchette, "Strengthening the CCP's 'Ideological Work,'" Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2020, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200817\\_Blanchette\\_CCP\\_Ideological\\_Work.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200817_Blanchette_CCP_Ideological_Work.pdf).
- 44 Matthew Campbell and Peter Martin, "China's Crackdown on Dissent Claims Free-Market Think Tank," Bloomberg, 27 August 2019, [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-27/china-s-crackdown-on-dissent-claims-free-market-think-tank](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-27/china-s-crackdown-on-dissent-claims-free-market-think-tank).
- 45 Lily Kuo, "Chinese Liberal Think Tank Forced to Close After Being Declared Illegal," *The Guardian*, 28 August 2019, [www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/28/chinese-liberal-think-tank-forced-to-close-after-being-declared-illegal](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/28/chinese-liberal-think-tank-forced-to-close-after-being-declared-illegal).
- 46 "CCP General Office and State Council General Office Opinions Concerning Strengthening the Construction of New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics," China Copyright and Media, 20 January 2015, <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2015/01/20/ccp-general-office-and-state-council-general-office-opinions-concerning-strengthening-the-construction-of-new-types-of-think-tanks-with-chinese-characteristics>.
- 47 Rolland, "China's Vision for a New World Order," 7-13.
- 48 Chenchen Chen, "The China Story: Emerging Public Diplomacy Actors," Observer Research Foundation, 4 February 2020, [www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-china-story-emerging-public-diplomacy-actors-61049](http://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-china-story-emerging-public-diplomacy-actors-61049).
- 49 Jonas Parelló-Plesner, "The Curious Case of Mr. Wang and the United Front," Hudson Institute, 11 May 2018, [www.hudson.org/research/14330-the-curious-case-of-mr-wang-and-the-united-front](http://www.hudson.org/research/14330-the-curious-case-of-mr-wang-and-the-united-front).
- 50 Tang Qi, "'Yidai Yilu' shi Zhongguo jinyibu zouxiang shijie de zhongyao tuijin" [Zhao Baige: 'One Belt, One Road' is an Important Way for China to Further Move Toward the World], *The Paper*, 26 December 2019, [www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_5349914](http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_5349914).
- 51 For a detailed catalog of BRI think tank alliances and their affiliations to CCP organs, see Nadège Rolland, "Mapping the Footprint of Belt and Road Influence Operations," *Sinopsis*, 8 August 2019, <https://sinopsis.cz/en/rolland-bri-influence-operations>.
- 52 "'Yidai Yilu' zhiku hezuo lianmeng chengli zhiku jiang dayoukewe" ['Belt and Road' Think-Tank Cooperation Alliance Sets Up Great Potential for Think-Tanks], *Xinhua*, 8 April 2015, [https://web.archive.org/web/20190808201656/http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-04/08/c\\_127668996.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20190808201656/http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-04/08/c_127668996.htm).
- 53 The "Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative," published in 2016, plainly states: "Educational exchange can serve as a bridge to closer people-to-people ties, whereas the cultivation of talent can buttress the efforts of these countries toward policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure, unimpeded trade, and financial integration along the routes." See "Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative," Belt and Road Portal, 12 October 2017, <https://archive.fo/0C87a#selection-1221.187-1221.460>.
- 54 Kucharczyk, "Exploiting Political Polarization in Poland," in Walker and Ludwig, eds., "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence," 116.
- 55 Ben Freeman, "Foreign Funding of Think Tanks in America," Foreign Influence Transparency Initiative, Center for International Policy, January 2020, [https://static.wixstatic.com/ugd/3ba8a1\\_4f06e99f35d4485b801f8dbfe33b6a3f.pdf](https://static.wixstatic.com/ugd/3ba8a1_4f06e99f35d4485b801f8dbfe33b6a3f.pdf). See also Zaid Jilani and Alex Emmons, "Hacked Emails Show UAE Building Close Relationship with D.C. Think Tanks That Push Its Agenda," *Intercept*, 30 July 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/07/30/uae-yousef-otaiba-cn-as-american-progress-michele-flournoy-drone>.
- 56 Fisher, "How Saudi Arabia Captured Washington."
- 57 Freeman, "Foreign Funding of Think Tanks in America," 15.
- 58 Australia's federal government had provided China Matters with over US\$1.5 million in grants since 2015, amounting to nearly half of its total funding. In August 2020, the government revoked its agreement to continue to fund the think tank. See Frank Chung, "Federal Budget 2020: China Matters Think Tank Loses Tax Exempt Status," *News.com.au*, 6 October 2020, [www.news.com.au/finance/economy/federal-budget/federal-budget-2020-china-matters-think-tank-loses-tax-exempt-status/news-story/fde67afcf181838e2d450dabe7fe6848](http://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/federal-budget/federal-budget-2020-china-matters-think-tank-loses-tax-exempt-status/news-story/fde67afcf181838e2d450dabe7fe6848).





**National Endowment  
for Democracy**

*Supporting freedom around the world*



**ABOUT THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY**

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world. Each year, NED makes more than 1,700 grants to support the projects of non-governmental groups abroad who are working for democratic goals in more than 90 countries. Since its founding in 1983, the Endowment has remained on the leading edge of democratic struggles everywhere, while evolving into a multifaceted institution that is a hub of activity, resources, and intellectual exchange for activists, practitioners, and scholars of democracy the world over.

**ABOUT THE FORUM**

The International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a leading center for analysis and discussion of the theory and practice of democracy around the world. The Forum complements NED's core mission—assisting civil society groups abroad in their efforts to foster and strengthen democracy—by linking the academic community with activists from across the globe. Through its multifaceted activities, the Forum responds to challenges facing countries around the world by analyzing opportunities for democratic transition, reform, and consolidation. The Forum pursues its goals through several interrelated initiatives: publishing the *Journal of Democracy*, the world's leading publication on the theory and practice of democracy; hosting fellowship programs for international democracy activists, journalists, and scholars; coordinating a global network of think tanks; and undertaking a diverse range of analytical initiatives to explore critical themes relating to democratic development.

