

> Domestic Political Interference in a Competitive Great-Power Environment

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Key Points: (1) There is wide agreement that the great-power setting is getting more competitive, but feasible U.S. strategies to address this challenge have been extensively analyzed; (2) An under-analyzed challenge is great powers' propensity to meddle in each others' domestic affairs; (3) What we know of this phenomenon suggests we may be in an era of transition in which the advantage in influencing the internal politics of other great powers has shifted from the United States to its rivals, which will have the means and the motive to conduct such operations; (4) The policy challenges are daunting, and the U.S. response so far has been strategically and intellectually incoherent.

It is a near consensus among scholars who have devoted their lives to the study of international security that the main drivers of great power competition are trending upwards. The preponderance of power buttressing the existing global order is declining, which lowers the relative costs to dissatisfied powers of challenging the status quo. Yet the U.S.-led coalition faces strong incentives to stand firm—so strong that even the putatively disruptive President Trump is actually only disrupting alliances and confidence in U.S. leadership while not actually backing away from any U.S. commitments. The result is increasingly competitive military postures and potential escalation risks in East Asia and Europe. In addition, key major power governments (notably China and Russia) are incorporating nationalism in their domestic political strategies, which can complicate states' bargaining flexibility and generate competition beyond what might be expected from states' external interests. Some leaders may be willing to pay increased competition costs, even if they are not strictly optimal for state security or economic interests, because of high payoffs in domestic support. Add to this the rise of populist leaders and the confidence in this pessimistic prediction increases. And I hardly need add the Trump factor. While many

academic experts make the case for a careful U.S. strategic pullback, almost none thinks that the current U.S. "strategy" of destabilizing its leadership role while at the same time refusing to concede any specific global position augurs for great power amity.

Most of the strategic challenges this new great power security environment presents have been extensively analyzed. Here I discuss a less examined one: great power meddling in each other's domestic affairs. In particular, we may be in an era of transition in which the advantage in influencing the internal politics of other great powers has shifted from the United States to its rivals. Russia's alleged interference in the U.S. 2016 election may thus be just the opening gun. Let me discuss briefly what is known about the phenomenon, what might be new, and what might be done about it. Possessing by far the greatest capacity to make and break global orders, great powers belong in a class by themselves. In an anarchic, self-help world they are the most truly sovereign political actors, and so we would expect the politics surrounding mutual violations of that sovereignty to be different for them than between great powers and weaker states. Scholars don't have a lot to say about this subject in part because so much of the behavior concerned is shrouded in secrecy and in part because they just haven't focused on it. But recent years have seen an outpouring of research on overt and covert regime change interventions, and historians have been toiling away to uncover the secret world of great power meddling in other great powers' internal affairs. Putting these two streams of research together allows a few generalizations.

First, as we would expect, great power influence operations in each others' domestic affairs is less frequent and significant than the more picayune politics of big power meddling in small powers. Since 1812, there is no strong case of an overt

regime change operation against a great power in peacetime (Downes). There are lots of covert operations, to be sure, but they are much less frequent and consequential (O'Rourke) than in the weaker state setting.

Second, however, influence operations of various sorts ranging from efforts to unseat or replace leaders, undermine figures in the rival power thought to be inimical to the intervener's interests, to basic harassment, undermining, weakening or "bleeding" measures are ubiquitous (Levin). For example, in the Cold War the Soviets used the CPUSA as an arm of policy attempting to influence U.S. domestic politics and undermine the U.S. global standing, while the KGB's "Service A" conducted various and sundry active measures for years (Mitrokhin, Andrews, Kalugin), including attempts to thwart the elections of certain candidates (e.g., Nixon), undermine the U.S. by supporting various strains in the civil rights movement; discredit individuals via false information operations (Hoover, ML King, Scoop Jackson, Brzezinski). These featured forgeries, fake letters, fake news stories, bribery, infiltration, material and logistical support for conspiracy theorists, even a bomb set off in Harlem. For its part, the U.S. government collaborated with notorious Nazis to recruit and assist nationalist insurgents in the USSR's western borderlands in the early Cold War, and conducted systematic information operations throughout the Cold War including ongoing support for nationalist oppositionists in Ukraine and the Baltic states as well as varieties of reform movements within the Soviet elite (Mitrovich; Burds; Kuzio). In the waning days of the Cold War and the post Cold War era, U.S. influence operations took the form of "public-private partnerships." NGOs and foundations that rose to prominence during this period, particularly those devoted to dispensing democracy assistance, became institutionalized features of U.S. foreign policy (Geohagen). We viewed these as utterly benign; not all political actors in the target states agreed.

Third, the strategic calculations on all sides are clearly dauntingly complex and resistant to generalization but the chief desideratum is expediency not norms or law. That is, what kept great power meddling at relatively low levels was not any reticence about the requisite lying and breaking of putative norms but rather opportunity, incentives, and escalation risks (Carson). In a nutshell, if you think you can advance your interests by intervening in a rival great power's domestic affairs and you can keep the risks low—either because you are strong enough vis-a-vis the rival to control escalation risks or you can

keep the operation so covert as to frustrate the other side's ability to retaliate—you will do it. For example, the U.S. aid to the anti-Soviet insurgency in the early Cold War never reached greater proportions (despite the fact that it was a serious insurgency) in part because of escalation risks but more because the U.S. quickly learned that Stalin's USSR was such a formidable counterinsurgent. And once the USSR obtained atomic and nuclear weapons, escalation risk dominated the U.S. decision to scale down the program.

If we accept for purposes of discussion the U.S. IC's conclusion regarding Russia, this raises a question: What's new? Compared to the Cold War (and, indeed many earlier examples), the essential nature of the operation is old news. Everything the Russian government is alleged to have done or facilitated has clear analogues in the past. Compared to the post-Cold War world, however, a lot is new—and unsettling from the U.S. perspective. Russia appears not to have feared escalation risk in this case, likely in part because it may feel stronger vis-à-vis the U.S. overall and in part because the technological and information environment allows a larger, potentially higher payoff operation to remain plausibly deniable.

In the bigger picture, authoritarian great powers may be brittle in some ultimate sense (that is, rationally more fearful than established democracies about regime change) while at the same time very robust in the near term. Not only can they rely on the standard authoritarian's toolkit for keeping domestic actors in line, they have been developing clever new techniques for defanging what they think are the west's main levers of influence: repressing foreign NGOs operating on their territory (Chaudhry) and controlling information flow and dissemination. Their ultimate sense of brittleness gives them a big incentive to keep democratic great powers on the back foot, while the robust tools at their disposal in the near term make them confident that they can insulate themselves from U.S. responses in kind. This puts the onus on Washington to escalate to the overt domain.

What is to be done? Sanctions imposed by the Obama administration and more recently at Congress's initiative illustrate the challenge. The signal they send is muddled in part because they are not mainly retaliation for election interference but also for Russian actions in Ukraine and human rights violations—clearly the most punishing sanctions would go away if Ukraine were settled. Defense against meddling of this kind is intrinsically hard in a free and open society.

Symmetrical deterrence—by credibly threatening more damaging covert interference against Russia or any other major power that contemplates doing what Russia is alleged to have done in 2016—confronts the apparent authoritarian advantage. It is just much easier to influence an election than to overthrow an authoritarian regime. As long as plausible deniability is the red line, options may be limited, especially with the authoritarians' NGO crackdown. Russia (and China) would appear to be more vulnerable to nationalist separatism than the U.S., so the advantage there might lie with Washington. But, again, so far Russia and China have proven to be effective counterinsurgents and the level of aid needed to get above that bar would clearly cross the plausible deniability threshold.

An order-based approach under which tacit or explicit norms of restraint in this area are developed confronts major hurdles. Big powers are not going to stop intervening in small powers' domestic affairs, so any explicit norms would highlight hypocrisy from the start. Even more tacit norms of restraint among the major powers may be hard to establish. If I'm right that the balance now lies with the authoritarians—what

inducement can we offer them to deny themselves this tool? The norms approach, moreover, runs afoul of the essentially murky moral and ethical world of this kind of interventionism. It's fine to undertake external action aimed at influencing a rival great power's internal politics (this is very common, as with U.S. containment, especially with Reagan era policies). It's accepted that great powers will spy on each other and collect intelligence. It's fine when whistleblowers release information—even if obtained under dubious circumstances—after all, “the public has a right to know.” The press can “collude” with a leaker like Daniel Ellsberg. But bring all this together—influencing domestic politics, foreign intelligence gathering, and releasing information—and suddenly it is totally illegitimate and shocking.

Given the challenges of defense and deterrence, perhaps the norm based approach is worth more effort. My recommendation would be for U.S. government experts to get to work on a problem I, a least, can't solve: a legally and morally consistent argument against great power meddling in another great power's domestic affairs.