Editor’s Note: This is the third article in a series on digital authoritarianism. The introductory essay can be found here. Steven Feldstein’s essay, “When it Comes to Digital Authoritarianism, China is a Challenge — But Not the Only Challenge,” can be found here. The concept for the series emerged from a policy workshop hosted by Bridging the Gap and the Center for New American Security.
In January, U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper said that China had developed “a 21st century surveillance state with unprecedented abilities to censor speech and infringe upon basic human rights. Now, it is exporting its facial recognition software and systems abroad.” In remarks at Cornell University in October, Rep. Adam Schiff stated, “China poses perhaps the greatest threat to democracy: developing tools of oppression at home, and exporting these digital technologies of repression.” Where digital technologies were once heralded as supporting greater participation, transparency, and democratization, they are now regarded as bolstering surveillance, disinformation, and authoritarianism.

Yet China’s exports are only one part of the story. While China is subsidizing and selling this technology, that is not the same as a dedicated effort to remake other countries in China’s authoritarian image. Ultimately, the demand for these technologies and how they are used depend more on local political conditions than Chinese grand strategy. To ensure that policy responses are effective rather than counterproductive, it is important that we start with an accurate understanding of why digital authoritarianism is spreading and its impact.

What’s Driving It?

First is emulation. Anecdotally, many governments around the world have looked to China’s success with high-tech surveillance and censorship and to a lesser extent to Russia’s success in using social media to spread disinformation. In 2015, Tanzania passed cyber security laws that mirrored China’s. A Tanzanian official later spoke enviously of China’s ability to develop homegrown social media that is “safe, constructive, and popular.”
Second is diffusion. Organizations and companies tied to Russia have been linked to social media influence operations in countries across Africa, including Sudan, Libya, Central African Republic, Madagascar, and Mozambique. In the realm of technology-enhanced surveillance, China’s willingness to finance and build this infrastructure has helped facilitate the widespread adoption of these technologies in democratic and authoritarian countries alike.

But Chinese companies are not alone in spreading these technologies. According to a report by Steven Feldstein, repressive countries like Saudi Arabia rarely buy such technologies from a single source, relying not only on Huawei but also companies based in democracies such as the United States (Google and Amazon), the United Kingdom (BAE), and Japan (NEC). Whether technology is inherently illiberal or neutral, with their usage depending on local interests, norms, and protections, it is clear that these technologies have not emanated solely from authoritarian regimes.

China has also provided softer forms of assistance, such as trainings for foreign officials, but it is unclear what foreign officials actually learn from those sessions and junkets to China. As Maria Repnikova finds in her ongoing research, Chinese trainings are aimed more at showing off China’s success than teaching foreign officials how to adopt Chinese practices.

As we know from decades of experience with international development programs, local conditions and incentives often determine whether participants are interested and able to take up whatever lessons are conveyed. And local officials are often more interested in advancing their own projects and parochial interests than in following foreign advice. As Iginio Gagliardone notes in his book, *China, Africa, and the Future of the Internet*:

> African states, rather than being passive recipients of blueprints developed elsewhere, have demonstrated remarkable skills in making use of Beijing’s openings in the ICT [information and communication technologies] sector to bolster their own development projects.
Local actors have more latitude than Western commentators often assume in dealing with China — whether to coopt China’s largesse for their own ends, or to push back when Chinese terms are too onerous. Tanzanian admiration for China’s example did not stop the newly elected president, John Magufuli, from suspending a major Chinese-invested port project, calling the terms “exploitative and awkward.”

A third factor is the evolving character of international norms, both formal and implicit, that govern the digital space. Since the birth of the internet, China and Russia have voiced concerns over the threat it poses to their domestic ability to govern. Both countries have sought to promote “cyber sovereignty” in international discussions over how the internet should be governed.

But norms concerning the appropriate use of digital tools are also shaped by the practices of powerful governments, including the United States and other democracies, to permit, condone, or carry out intrusions on individual privacy, whether by government or private actors. Support for illiberal practices within established democracies mean that would-be adopters of these technologies, both authoritarian and democratic, face fewer international costs to deploying these systems of technologically enhanced control over society.

What’s Not Driving It?

It is equally important to recognize that, unlike the Cold War, neither China nor Russia today is engaged in a messianic effort to topple foreign governments and replace them with ideologically similar regimes. While Xi has mooted a China “solution” to the problems facing humankind, this kind of rhetoric has sought to create space for autocracy to survive in a system dominated by liberal democracies – rather than forcibly exporting Chinese-style autocracy. As for Russia, Lucan Way writes, “While Putin has consistently crushed democracy at home, he seems happy to support competitive elections and opposition media in countries with anti-Russian governments.”
Leaders in both Moscow and Beijing welcome evidence of democratic dysfunction, as it makes them look better by comparison. Both governments have grown more assertive in using “sharp power” — including disinformation and censorship — to shape public opinion. Russia’s disinformation efforts in the 2016 U.S. election have been well documented, though some observers have argued that Russian interference was motivated as much by an opportunistic desire to retaliate.

As for China, there is evidence of nascent but less sophisticated government-backed efforts to use social media to spread disinformation and discourage international support for Taiwan and Hong Kong. But while some see Beijing’s efforts in Taiwan as a test run for a global propaganda strategy, Beijing’s primary motivations stem from domestic insecurity and a desire to thwart perceived threats to national unity. (And Beijing’s heavy-handed tactics seem to be losing rather than winning hearts and minds in Taiwan and Hong Kong.) Overseas, the Chinese government is more focused on advancing its economic and security interests than in determining whether the governments it deals with are fairly elected. Material interests, not a universalist mission of promoting autocracy abroad, are the key drivers of China’s global strategy.

**Democratic Backsliding and Digital Authoritarianism**

Fears of democracy’s retreat around the world are rising, with setbacks in countries from Turkey to Brazil to Hungary. But fears of democracy’s demise may be exaggerated, as the global proportion of countries that are democratic remains high. In China’s backyard, for example, there is little evidence of democratic backsliding across Southeast Asia. Even if democratic practices have weakened in some countries, as in the Philippines and Indonesia, others have become more liberal, such as Myanmar.

Assessing the political impact of technological change must also take into account factors that condition its usage, as well as other forces that determine political outcomes. Democratic backsliding has many fathers, including not only domestic conditions but also systemic developments, as Seva Gunitsky’s work suggests. As a
social scientist, I expect that it will be very difficult to determine the relative importance of technology vis-à-vis other factors, just as economists and political scientists are still debating whether it is technology (robots) or outsourcing (the “China shock”) that has done more to decimate manufacturing jobs in the United States. These are econometric debates that are unlikely to be definitively resolved.

When assessing technology’s political impact, one must keep in mind selection effects and counterfactuals. Let’s start with selection effects: What differentiates a country that has adopted tools of digital authoritarianism from one that considered but declined to adopt those tools? Understanding the different political trajectories or preexisting conditions that separate adopters from non-adopters is crucial to diagnosing the difference that these technologies make.

On to counterfactuals: What would politics in that country have looked like if that technology had not been adopted? Would it be more or less autocratic had the government relied instead on old-fashioned methods of repression and surveillance?

**Reinforcing Democracy**

Answering these questions is a necessary first step to right-sizing the challenge posed by the spread of digital technologies that can be used to enhance the power of the state — whether to combat terrorism or repress dissent. Exaggerating the threat posed by technology could lead to the mistaken conclusion that combating the global spread of surveillance technologies will be enough to secure democracy.

At the same time, liberal governments and organizations can help draw attention to examples of governments that have chosen to roll back or constrain the use of digital authoritarianism and predatory surveillance techniques. Just as nonproliferation experts have studied countries that chose to dismantle their nuclear weapons programs voluntarily, so might democracy and privacy experts hold up the path taken by citizens and elected leaders who have worked to roll back and constrain technologies that were promoting illiberal practices.
Ecuador, which installed a Chinese monitoring system in 2011, began an investigation into its abuses under the new administration that came to office in 2017, including opening its records to *The New York Times*. The story highlighted China’s export of digital authoritarianism, but it is equally or perhaps more interesting as a story of the conditions under which democratic institutions and publics can say “no” to the excesses of digital surveillance by replacing “illiberal democrats” at the ballot box.

Even within liberal democracies, some localities have taken preemptive measures against tools of digital authoritarianism. For instance, in 2019 the cities of *San Francisco* and *Somerville* banned local agencies, including the police, from using facial recognition technology. The state of California also enacted a ban on the use of facial recognition or biometric surveillance in police body cameras, holding that “facial recognition and other biometric surveillance technology pose unique and significant threats to the civil rights and civil liberties of residents and visitors.”

The future of democracy is not only being fought across the globe. It is also being fought at home. To the extent that emulation is driving states to mimic or import Chinese or Russian practices, liberal governments need to perform better — to lead by example and demonstrate that democracy can deliver.

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**BECOME A MEMBER**

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