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“The Long Arm of China: Exporting Authoritarianism With Chinese Characteristics”
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Chairman Rubio, Chairman Smith, distinguished Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak to this important topic today. It is an honor to testify before this Commission alongside such expert colleagues.

Today I will address China’s outwardly directed efforts to shape expression and communication globally, and the negative implications this poses for democratic expression and discourse, even within democracies. In particular, I will discuss how the Chinese government directs and harnesses private sector activity in the Internet and technology space, as well its efforts to reshape global narratives through a range of influence activities that have typically been categorized as “soft power.”

To begin with, consider a metaphor sometimes invoked to explain China’s domestic approach to the Internet, namely, that of the “walled garden.” The garden is not devoid of color: indeed, certain flowers are cultivated and allowed to bloom profusely, while those plants deemed weeds are yanked out by the root. In this way is the space pruned to fit the preferences of the master gardener.

While metaphors are always imperfect, this one does convey important ideas about how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) approaches China’s information, media and technology sector, ideas that also have relevance for its international approach. Three key aspects of its domestic “walled garden” approach are relevant here.

First, the CCP has put the technology it needs into place. The so-called “Great Firewall” is dependent on an elaborately layered system of control, beginning with the technological and communications “pipes” themselves and extending to what is an increasingly advanced system of not just censorship but comprehensive surveillance. A recent BBC story noted that there are 170 million CCTV cameras in place, many enhanced with facial recognition technology, and an estimated 400 million new cameras coming online in the next three years.ⁱ The *Wall Street Journal* reported last week about a man detained for a stray wisecrack made on a private chat on the WeChat messaging platform; government authorities can now identify citizens on the street through facial recognition, monitor all online behavior, and identify potential (or even future) dissenters and “troublemakers”.ⁱⁱ For an example of this dystopian model taken to an extreme, look no further than the Chinese province of Xinjiang, where the government tests tools like iris recognition, and constant surveillance is a fact of daily life.ⁱⁱⁱ

Second, it is not simply about the technology. Beijing relies on individuals, corporations and institutions for not just censorship and self-censorship but the proactive shaping of norms, narratives and attitudes. For instance, the Chinese government places the responsibility on private sector companies as gatekeepers to monitor and circumscribe online activity, as well as on individual users to self-censor. In addition, as a recent study noted, the government fabricates roughly 448 million social media comments a year, injecting certain narrative elements into online chatter to distract or cheerlead in order to stop the spread of information that may spur collective action.^{iv} One of the study's authors has described the overall approach as the three Fs: fear that induces self-censorship, friction that makes true information hard to find, and flooding of the information space with distraction or chaos.^v

Underpinning all of this activity is the third aspect: Beijing's core economic bargain, which consists of preferential treatment and implicit prosperity for those who respect Beijing's so-called "red lines," and punishment for those who do not. Chinese Internet and technology companies, who are probing frontiers in mobile commerce, artificial intelligence, and a host of other areas, have with direct or indirect help from the state evolved into formidable behemoths with global ambitions. While their relationship with the Party is not always straightforward, they understand that staying on the CCP's good side (which includes reliable policing of communication and development of technologies that will benefit the state) will deliver tangible benefits, while getting crosswise might entail severe corporate and even personal penalties.

The entire combination of these aspects is a complex system that curtails freedoms, suppresses dissent, and manages public opinion, reliant not on any individual element but on a principle of redundancy built into every layer. Why is this domestic approach relevant to our topic today? Because it is becoming evident that the CCP under Xi Jinping is intent on encompassing the rest of the world within its "walled garden."

This is not to say that China now attempts to control every facet of communication, or that it wants to impose its exact model of authoritarian governance everywhere. But it is increasingly true that Beijing's technology ambitions, combined with its attempts to determine on a global scale the parameters of "acceptable" speech and opinion with respect to China, pose clear threats to freedom of expression and democratic discourse outside its borders. Indeed, in 2015 Freedom House's China Media Bulletin estimated that since Xi came to power, the Chinese government had negatively affected freedom of expression outside China over 40 times in 17 different countries and institutions; that number has only increased since then.^{vi}

While Beijing obviously cannot muffle dissent and accountability across different countries in the same way it does at home, it does seek to apply its principal "gardening" techniques within the international sphere. First, while it cannot control the infrastructure and technology of the global Internet, Chinese companies are actively building out key telecommunications infrastructure in the developing world, particularly on the African continent, which has raised questions about security and the dissemination of censorship capabilities.^{vii} In addition, if China succeeds in dominating the emerging global market for data-enabled objects (the "Internet of things"), as it seeks to do through its Internet Plus initiative, its approach to embedded surveillance may become the norm in places with weak individual privacy protections.

Moreover, the same Chinese tech giants whose platforms enable the domestic surveillance described in last week's *Wall Street Journal* story are taking stakes in the firms that provide key global apps and services. Just last Friday, Tencent (the parent company of WeChat) and Spotify announced that they had taken minority stakes in each other, following earlier Tencent acquisitions of minority stakes in Snap (the parent company of Snapchat) and Tesla.^{viii} Artificial intelligence companies such as iFlyTek pioneer the surveillance aims of the government through the use of big data and weak Chinese privacy standards, while also entering into deals with industry leaders such as Volkswagen and others.^{ix} It is reasonable to ask whether Chinese firms with global ambitions plan to follow the same explicit and/or unspoken Party dictates with respect to data-gathering, surveillance and policing of "sensitive" communication abroad as they do at home.

These technological advances dovetail with the government's efforts to shape the Internet and other future technologies through key Internet governance bodies and discussions. The Chinese government's initially derided attempt to direct this conversation, the recently concluded World Internet Conference in Wuzhen, succeeded this year in attracting high-level Silicon Valley participation. Importantly, it established the optic that the world's leading technology firms have blessed China's approach to the Internet.

Second, as is the case within China's borders, it is never only about the technology. The Chinese government has spent tens of billions of dollars to shape norms, narratives and attitudes in other countries, relying on the cultivation of relationships with individuals, educational and cultural institutions, and centers of policy influence. Such efforts are not properly conceived of through the familiar concept of "soft power," which is generally described as reliant on attraction and persuasion, but rather as "sharp power," which is principally about distraction and manipulation, as argued in a new study released last week by the National Endowment for Democracy examining authoritarian influence in young democracies.^x

One of the clearest examples of this "sharp power" is the expanding network of Confucius Institutes, controversial due to their lack of transparency, disregard of key tenets of academic freedom, and ability to function as an arm of the Chinese state within academic campuses.^{xi} Concerns have been raised about self-censorship on topics related to China in the realm of academic and other publishing worldwide, posing fundamental questions about freedom of expression in democracies.^{xii} In addition, China's heavily funded people-to-people diplomacy exposes visitors from Africa and Latin America, as well as the young democracies in Central and Eastern Europe within the context of China's "16+1" initiative, to a carefully managed narrative about China's "win-win" approach, finding fertile ground in countries which lack the expertise to examine these messages and arguments critically.^{xiii}

Finally, underlying all of this is the unavoidable aspect of China's carrot-and-stick contract with the rest of the world. China's efforts to enclose the rest of the world within its walled garden would not have been feasible had not governments, universities, publishers, Hollywood and technology companies all been roped into this implicit and sometimes explicit bargain.^{xiv} Apple CEO Tim Cook, one of the most high-level Silicon Valley participants at the recent Wuzhen

conference, essentially underscored this point through his celebration of China's digital vision, paired with the company's earlier yanking of anti-censorship VPNs from its app store in China.^{xv}

Some might say that the Chinese government is simply pursuing its strategic and economic interests, like any other country. Even if views differ on this, it nonetheless behooves the international community to acknowledge that the values that inform Beijing's interests in this realm pose serious concerns for democratic norms and institutions around the world. It is therefore both timely and necessary for democratic governments and civil society to be proactive in asserting why norms such as transparency, accountability, and pluralism are critical to their interests, and to come up with fresh approaches to build resilience. First steps might include:

- Continuing to shine a light on the ways in which the Chinese government's media and technology initiatives, as well as "sharp power" influence activities, are impinging on democratic institutions outside China's borders. While this is now beginning to happen in some places, notably Australia and New Zealand, it is still the case that most democratic societies are not yet connecting all the dots, much less formulating nuanced responses that hew to core values.
- Facilitating democratic learning, particularly within countries without deep capacity to analyze China. Because the Chinese government constrains critical discourse about issues it considers sensitive, and these constraints are built into the fabric of its engagement with both state and non-state actors in young democracies in particular, genuine critical discourse about China may be lacking.
- Seeking transparency in agreements with Chinese state-affiliated institutions, such as Confucius Institutes and others. Particularly (but not only) when public funds in democracies are involved, civil society should insist on its right to understand whether fundamental issues such as freedom of expression are placed at risk.
- Collectively establishing mutually agreed informal norms and "good practice" within respective industries (such as publishing, academia, media, film, and technology) so that individual actors are not as susceptible as they are now to being picked off and pressured by the Chinese government or its surrogates. For instance, academic publishers in democratic settings might collectively agree to resist censoring materials that pertain to China, and so on. In the absence of such norms defending key democratic values, China will continue to set standards based on the CCP's restrictive understanding of these values.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to answering your questions.

ⁱ "In Your Face: China's All-Seeing State," BBC, Dec. 10, 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-china-42248056/in-your-face-china-s-all-seeing-state>

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- ^v Joshua A. Tucker, Yannis Theocharis, Margaret E. Roberts, and Pablo Barbera, “From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media and Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 28, Issue 4, October 2017. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/liberation-turmoil-social-media-and-democracy>
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