

“China as the Keystone of a Global Network of Autocracies”

Testimony of Christopher Walker  
Vice President, Studies and Analysis  
National Endowment for Democracy

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“An Axis of Autocracy? China’s Relations with Russia, Iran, and North Korea”

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Co-Chairs Friedberg and Stivers, distinguished Commissioners and staff, thank you for the opportunity to testify on China’s pivotal role in shaping the international environment and how deepening cooperation among a group of repressive powers is supercharging authoritarian influence globally. This hearing is especially timely and critical, given China’s increasingly essential role in leading and enabling the efforts by a diverse set of ambitious authoritarian regimes to undermine democratic rivals, pioneer new techniques of social control, and carry out acts of aggression that threaten global security and stability.

China’s leadership over the last generation has invested heavily in projecting power internationally. This has been especially evident since the time of Xi Jinping’s rise to a position of paramount power in 2012. Less obvious has been the extent to which China has used a web of relationships with other autocracies to enhance its leverage, where possible to achieve multiplier effects, and more generally guide the global rules of the road in a direction more friendly to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) interests, values, and preferences.

And as Beijing deepens its strategic cooperation and coordination with countries that include but are not limited to Russia, Iran, and North Korea, China functions as the “keystone” that makes the authoritarian whole stronger than any single one of its parts. This development represents a comprehensive and even systemic threat to the United States and other free systems.

Moreover, as China and other ambitious authoritarian regimes have worked more intentionally in common cause, their ability to exert influence has grown. Over the years, democracies have consistently underestimated the scope and durability of the challenge from this networked authoritarian grouping. Assumptions that authoritarian relationships are temporary or superficial “marriages of convenience,” for instance, have led analysts to understate the true risk we face. We need to look at the coordinated actions of these regimes, as well as the structures they are building, in order to understand the depth and scope of their ambitions.

The ways in which autocratic powers have coalesced behind Russia's brutal, full-scale invasion of Ukraine lay bare the new situation. A full, networked response from the community of autocracies has taken shape to back Moscow's war effort: Iran produces kamikaze drones; Belarus serves as a critical staging area for Russian operations; North Korea provides troops; and China offers a suite of support to Russia, ranging from diplomatic cover to putting the formidable Chinese global state propaganda machinery at work pushing out Kremlin-friendly narratives.

These acts of cooperation are driven, in part, by opportunism. Leaders in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Pyongyang no doubt sense a crisis of confidence in free societies and are pressing what they perceive as an advantage to bolster their power on the global stage.

Yet there is a much deeper story behind these regimes' cohesiveness and willingness to work together; we should not suffer a failure of imagination regarding their high strategic ambition. They are telling the free world what they would like to do.

In February 2022, following a summit in Beijing between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, the two leaders issued a joint statement that described the relations between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation as a friendship with "no limits." Days later, Moscow dispatched thousands of troops to Ukraine, launching a full-scale invasion of the country that has upended European, and global, security in ways not seen since the first half of the 20th century.

In Moscow in March 2023, at another meeting between the leaders, Xi and Putin pledged to drive significant changes in the world that have "not been seen in 100 years." At the time, they signed agreements aimed at boosting bilateral cooperation on a range of issues. That same year, China launched the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and expanded BRICS. These groupings aim to carve out autocratically-minded regimes and developing economies from the U.S. and other democracies, leaving Beijing to sit at the helm.

And, following the trend, in May 2024 Xi and Putin pledged a "new era" of partnership between their countries. A joint statement from the leaders coming out of the meeting described the deepening of the strategic relationship, including plans to enhance military ties and how defense sector collaboration between Beijing and Moscow would improve regional and global security.

### **China's Focus on Institutions and Ideas**

While the deepening authoritarian cooperation in the military sphere stands out, it is important to recognize that China has been investing in the wider world—and building its web of global alliances—over a protracted period of time, more often than not in ways that rely on non-kinetic forms of power. In this era of fierce competition, the leadership in Beijing has largely sought "to win without fighting."

For the remainder of my testimony, I will focus on the following areas of critical interest:

- China's leadership in reshaping international institutions
- Beijing's acumen and ambitions in the ideas and technological realms

Across these domains, autocrats seek to tear down the scaffolding of liberal institutions that might either constrain their aggression on the global stage, or preserve bastions of free expression where people at home or abroad dare to criticize their behavior. Accustomed to protecting their power through the suppression of rights and freedoms at home, they are eagerly seizing opportunities to extend these practices globally. To such ends, Beijing in key respects relies on the exertion of sharp power — authoritarian efforts to achieve political dominance through the monopolization of ideas, suppression of alternative viewpoints, and exploitation of partner institutions — as a way to shape the global operating environment and influence the political dynamics of countries in one world region after another.<sup>1</sup>

Non-democratic governments are acting systematically to undermine and repurpose the “infrastructure” of organizations in the UN system and beyond that set the rules—whether around human rights, economic development, or the development and use of critical technologies. Beijing’s influence is particularly concerning in the tech domain. Here, on-the-ground control of critical digital infrastructure across Africa, the Indo-Pacific, and beyond by CCP-aligned companies such as Huawei functions in tandem with PRC efforts in the UN to legitimize norms of censorship, surveillance, and invasive social control. Through these dual streams of action, China is also fortifying its autocratic alliances: PRC tech companies help friendly autocracies to shore up their control at home, and governments increasingly reliant on PRC digital infrastructure themselves become reliable votes in international bodies.

### **Reshaping International Institutions**

Authoritarians are using a two-pronged strategy in the institutional sphere: unmoor the institutions that have served as the glue of the post–Cold War order, on one hand, while promoting alternative, authoritarian-friendly organizations, on the other.

Repressive regimes are diligently working within the regional and international organizations that have been integral to the global political framework — the United Nations, the Organization of American States, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe — in order to neuter their ability to support rule of law and democracy standards—essentially as a method for removing the stigma of authoritarianism.

In the UN system, Moscow and Beijing serve as key nodes of the Like-Minded Group, a largely autocratic grouping that has worked to hollow out and make a mockery of the international human rights system.

Meanwhile, authoritarian governments are establishing their own organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which are promoting alternative, authoritarian-friendly rules, and expanding the circle of countries that are participating. For instance, Iran and Belarus joined the SCO in 2023 and 2024, respectively. These

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Walker, “What Is ‘Sharp Power?’” *Journal of Democracy* 29 (July 2018): 18, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/what-is-sharp-power/>.

efforts and structures have matured to a degree that some analysts now speak of “authoritarian international law.”<sup>2</sup>

Since its inception in 2009, the BRICS grouping of countries — originally Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa — has expanded to an extent that its members now encompass nearly half of the world’s population. At the last BRICS summit in 2023 held in South Africa, six new member states were admitted, starting in 2024: Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>3</sup>

In the UN system, Beijing’s exertion of influence touches wide-ranging interests, from aviation to health to technology, in ways that challenge the U.S. and other democratic countries’ interests.

Beijing, for example, exploited its position as head of the UN International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) in 2021 to shield dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko when Belarusian authorities, using a ruse of a false bomb threat, forced a civilian airliner to land in Minsk.<sup>4</sup> This was part of a brazen, norm-shattering gambit to detain passenger and independent journalist, Raman Pratasevich, on the flight. Then Secretary General of the ICAO, Fang Liu, a PRC national, was around the same time also criticized for keeping Taiwan marginalized on crucial COVID-19 protocols.

PRC leaders have also sought to manipulate the UN system in ways that reflect their penchant for enforcing secrecy and dodging accountability—at home, as well as in their opaque bilateral tech, infrastructure, and investment deals with foreign governments around the globe. Beijing was responsible for grievous harm, at global scale, in the context of the World Health Organization (WHO) when the CCP authorities suppressed domestic discussion of the Wuhan outbreak and refused to share information with global authorities. This concealment hobbled the WHO’s response, causing millions of people beyond China’s borders to pay a horrific price. Later, Beijing tried to manipulate the outcome of WHO inquiries into the origins of COVID-19. Now, some four years since the onset of the pandemic, Beijing continues to resist WHO requests for data that might shed light on the source of the virus.<sup>5</sup>

### **Beijing’s Focus on Technologies that Will Shape the Future of Freedom**

The CCP’s efforts to subvert the guiding institutions of our international system in ways that undermine principles of transparency, rule of law, and free expression all take on particular urgency given the rapid diffusion of emerging technologies. Last month, Deep Seek drew the

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Ginsburg, “How Authoritarians Use International Law,” *Journal of Democracy*, October 2020, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/how-authoritarians-use-international-law/>.

<sup>3</sup> “BRICS: The Burgeoning of an International Repressive Alliance?,” *CIVICUS Lens*, September 1, 2023, <https://lens.civicus.org/brics-the-burgeoning-of-an-international-repressive-alliance/>.

<sup>4</sup> Brett D. Schaefer and Danielle Pletka, “Can the ICAO Recover After Chinese Stewardship?,” *The Heritage Foundation*, July 29, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/can-the-icao-recover-after-chinese-stewardship>.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Walker, “How China Exports Secrecy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/how-china-exports-secrecy>.

world's attention to China's rapid progress in the development of key technologies—and the export of authoritarian norms, such as censorship of content about the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, along with them. But Deep Seek represents only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the CCP's increasing influence over the networks that relay our digital communications, the platforms that shape our access to information, and, not least, the governance and surveillance technologies that governments worldwide are deploying in their cities.

In this regard, Beijing's export of AI-powered surveillance systems and other repressive technologies helps expand the web of autocratic relationships on the ground, while the CCP's activity in the international system challenges norms of openness that have long shaped internet governance. With its "Great Firewall" monitoring and restricting all internet traffic into and out of the country, China has long been known for incubating and refining digital censorship and control. These techniques serve as a model for emulation for other authoritarian states, with regimes in countries as diverse as Cuba, Iran, and Belarus, drawing on parts of the system.<sup>6</sup>

As Russia deploys increasingly sophisticated blocking mechanisms to close citizens' access to outside information and Pakistan, Nepal, and Cambodia pursue internet gateways that will funnel all international internet traffic through a government-controlled chokepoint, the world is looking ever more like China.

China's technological prowess enables it to tutor other governments in suppressing online freedom. In part, this is due to a technical or technological aspect through which Beijing offers capacity with tools. In a 2024 report, Article 19 showed how China's export of fiberoptic and satellite systems, 5G infrastructure, digital economy, smart cities, and other emerging technologies across the Indo-Pacific region under the banner of its "Digital Silk Road" could be used for data access and information control.<sup>7</sup> But the ability to curate information according to authoritarian preferences in an era of information abundance offers "proof of concept" that in effect feeds other autocrats' hopes and desires for the possibility of tech-based social control.

China's tech prowess also supports the development of technologies of social control: At home, citizens carry digital identification cards with microchips containing personal data that allow the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to recognize faces and voices of its 1.4 billion-plus inhabitants.<sup>8</sup>

Facial-recognition cameras, phone interception devices, various "smart" systems, and newer techniques such as emotion recognition feed into centralized systems meant to incentivize conformity and penalize dissenting behavior. These include "safe cities" at the urban level, social credit registers that blacklist specific individuals, and draconian policing platforms that have made

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<sup>6</sup> Jordan J. Foley, "China's Authoritarian Grip: How China Reinforces Social Control, Cultivates a Climate of Fear, and Minimizes Dissent," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, November/December, 2023, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Nov/14/2003340193/-1/-1/1/VIEW%20FOLEY%20-%20JIPA.PDF/VIEW%20FOLEY%20-%20JIPA.PDF>.

<sup>7</sup> "China: The Rise of Digital Repression in the Indo-Pacific," Article 19, April 18, 2024, <https://www.article19.org/resources/china-the-rise-of-digital-repression-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

<sup>8</sup> Foley, "China's Authoritarian Grip."

possible unprecedented levels of ethnic and religious repression in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

Other governments have also caught on to the opportunities provided by advanced digital surveillance technologies, including the use of facial recognition to track down dissenters in Russia and Belarus, and women in Iran who refuse to wear the hijab. Recent data show that two PRC companies—Hikvision and Dahua—alone make up a third of the global market for surveillance cameras, and PRC-sourced AI surveillance solutions are present in more than eighty countries worldwide. Researchers have also found that autocratic states and weak democracies make up a disproportionate share of the purchasers of PRC surveillance technologies, and that these purchases increase during periods when they are seeking to crack down on their own people.<sup>9</sup> PRC-sponsored digital ID packages have also proved appealing to authoritarian regimes in other corners of the world, including Uganda and Venezuela.<sup>10</sup>

In short, China’s specialized authoritarian technologies make PRC ties an asset for current and aspiring autocrats around the globe. Meanwhile, PRC companies leverage these projects to collect ever greater volumes of digital data, which Beijing views as a strategic asset. By siphoning off data from insecure surveillance cameras, translation tools, and much more in countries worldwide, the CCP gains a powerful lever of control that might be used for traditional purposes (such as blackmail or espionage), the creation of next-generation influenced campaigns tailored to people’s hopes and fears, or even the establishment of systems designed to reward and punish individual behavior. By controlling the data, they put themselves in a position to control people as well.

The web of influence woven by PRC companies on the ground, together with a concerted public-private effort under rubrics such as China Standards 2035, have in turn put Beijing in a position to rally its allies and shift digital ground rules in global forums. While China has long sought to reshape what it sees as a U.S.-dominated digital governance ecosystem, Beijing is now more effectively coordinating autocracies and forming coalitions, especially within the UN system. These efforts have bolstered anti-democratic digital governance projects and secured influential positions for Beijing-aligned candidates in bodies such as the International Telecommunication Union. Rights advocates fear that authoritarian regimes fundamentally hostile to free expression, with Russia and China in the lead, have succeeded in infusing the recently adopted UN Cybercrime Convention and other international frameworks with principles that will legitimize vague laws on “fake news,” violations of privacy, and other techno-authoritarian moves by governments around the globe sympathetic to Beijing’s model of cybersovereignty.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Beraja, Andrew Kao, David Y. Yang, and Noam Yuchtman, “Exporting the Surveillance State via Trade in AI,” National Bureau of Economic Research (Working Paper 31676), September 2023, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w31676>.

<sup>10</sup> Olivia Solon, “Uganda’s Sweeping Surveillance State Is Built on National ID Cards,” Bloomberg, June 4, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2024-06-04/uganda-yoweri-museveni-s-critics-targeted-via-biometric-id-system>.

<sup>11</sup> “Defending Democratic Norms in Global Tech Governance,” National Endowment for Democracy, December 13, 2024, <https://www.ned.org/defending-democratic-norms-in-global-tech-governance/>.

While working actively within existing institutions, China also has been at the vanguard of developing parallel fora to promote its vision of digital governance, such as the World Internet Conference. In October 2023, at a Belt and Road Forum, China announced its own Global AI Governance Initiative, and in 2024 it issued the Shanghai Declaration on Global AI Governance. These initiatives seek to challenge the role of earlier, democracy-led AI governance initiatives, position Beijing as an AI norm-setter vis-à-vis the developing world, and situate AI governance more squarely in UN frameworks that will give authoritarian states greater weight in decision-making.<sup>12 13</sup>

These efforts to replace existing international initiatives with ones more fully subject to PRC control are part of a larger phenomenon that transcends the tech sphere and includes authoritarian clubs such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the Eurasian Economic Union that seek to institutionalize authoritarian preferences.

More fundamentally, the authoritarians' efforts across rules-setting institutions are not a theoretical exercise. An adversely reinforcing cycle has emerged: as norms and standards have come under more concerted pressure from the grouping of authoritarians and eroded at a system level, the reality on the ground, at a local level, is being reshaped as well. The phenomenon of transnational repression exemplifies this dynamic. Recent research from Freedom House points out that “cooperation between like-minded autocrats is particularly dangerous for exiled dissidents.” And, for example, “Belarusian and Central Asian authorities have relied on their deep-rooted ties with the Russian government to drive their transnational repression campaigns.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Authoritarian Cooperation in the Ideas Realm**

In order for China's institutional ambitions to gain traction, they require ideas that ultimately acquire resonance with key audiences. On this count, the Chinese authorities have built up capabilities that accompany China's interests as they have spread globally.

The Chinese authorities are making an argument — including with the UN system but also beyond it, often dressed up in flowery language — about the supposed benefits of China's governance approach. As Xi Jinping put it at the 19th National Congress of the CCP in 2017, this approach offers a “new option for nations that want to speed up their development while preserving their independence.” It is a message that China's global propaganda machine relentlessly pushes. The notion that Beijing preserves other countries' independence is fanciful and should be actively

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<sup>12</sup> “China Launches Global AI Governance Initiative,” GIP Digital Watch Observatory, October 18, 2023, <https://dig.watch/updates/china-launches-global-ai-governance-initiative>.

<sup>13</sup> Huw Roberts, “China's ambitions for global AI governance,” East Asia Forum, September 10, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/09/10/chinas-ambitions-for-global-ai-governance/>.

<sup>14</sup> Grady Vaughan, Yana Gorokhovskaia, and Nate Schenkkan, “Ten Findings from Ten Years of Data on Transnational Repression,” Freedom House, February 6, 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/ten-findings-ten-years-data-transnational-repression>.

countered. So too, for that matter, should any efforts to get “Xi Jinping language” incorporated into the text of UN documents.

The scope of ambition is visible in the “Global Civilization Initiative,” which Beijing introduced in March 2023. It promotes “a state-focused and state-defined values system” and marks another effort by the Chinese authorities to eliminate universal values in areas such as human rights and democracy.<sup>15</sup>

As a way of anchoring its ideas, for example, the CCP supports training initiatives for officials from developing countries in controlling civil society, censoring the internet, and building a single-party regime.<sup>16</sup>

Beijing’s ideas – and the values that underpin them – have a larger purpose. For instance, its vision is one where unchecked surveillance technology is used without limits to monitor everyday life. It is a vision where free speech is effectively nonexistent, replaced instead by ever-more sophisticated propaganda campaigns and a constrained set of state-sanctioned views. It is a vision profoundly hostile to the survival of any independent institutions—media outlets, universities, trade unions—that might serve as a launching pad for critics of authoritarian rule. It is a vision, shared by Beijing’s authoritarian partners, where authoritarian state power feels at liberty to take down just about any figure or organization that is perceived to pose a threat to the authorities. And in an era of transnational repression, this means both within, and beyond, borders.

China has spent tens of billions of dollars to shape public opinion and perceptions around the world, employing a toolkit that includes thousands of people-to-people exchanges, wide-ranging cultural activities, and the development of media enterprises with global reach. Some estimates put China’s outward-facing media spending at \$10 billion. PRC companies are working closely with state institutions on emerging technologies, such as generative AI and virtual reality, that are likely to supercharge these efforts, making possible ever more persuasive and personalized approaches to the top-down manipulation of people’s understanding of reality.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, other well-resourced authoritarian powers are mutually reinforcing narratives in the global commons. Russia reportedly puts more than \$300 million annually into RT alone. Other estimates place Moscow’s outward-facing information-related investments at \$1.5 billion. And, according to one account, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting in 2022 saw its budget increase to approximately \$1.26 billion.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Schuman, Jonathan Fulton, and Tuvia Gering, “How Beijing’s Newest Global Initiatives Seek to Remake the World Order,” Atlantic Council, June 21, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/how-beijings-newest-global-initiatives-seek-to-remake-the-world-order/>.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth C. Economy, *The World According to China* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2022), <https://www.cfr.org/book/world-according-china>.

<sup>17</sup> Daria Impiombato et al., “Persuasive Technologies in China: Implications for the Future of National Security,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, November 2024, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/persuasive-technologies-china-implications-future-national-security>.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Walker, “Discourse Power: The CCP’s Strategy to Shape the Global Information Space,” testimony before the Select Committee on Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party,



This media sphere engagement plays out in different ways in different settings. In Latin America, collaboration between the Russian and Chinese governments and their regional authoritarian counterparts, such as those in Venezuela and Cuba, enables a multiplier effect on narratives that, among other things, systematically assail the U.S., while propounding the ostensible benefits of one-party rule and focusing on democracies being decadent and unreliable.<sup>19</sup>

### **Implications for Free Societies**

China and the networked grouping of authoritarian regimes have preferences about the way the world should operate. They have their own set of “first principles.” Such principles could be understood as stemming from an ideological posture that “privileges state power over individual liberty and is fundamentally hostile to free expression, open debate, and independent thought,” and are plainly at odds with those of free societies.<sup>20</sup>

At a basic level, any response to this global challenge also must take into account the essential importance of keeping pressures toward greater openness alive within China itself. But it is equally urgent to recognize and counter the intensive, well-resourced efforts of China’s present leadership—working in common cause with other repressive regimes—to mainstream as the global norm authoritarian practices that crush individual freedom in the name of an artificially imposed “harmony.”

For the United States and other free societies, the ever more cohesive network of autocratic states that Beijing inspires and supports presents a top-order challenge. As China deepens its strategic cooperation and coordination with countries such as Russia, Iran, and North Korea across the military, technological, and political spheres, the global operating environment is bound to become even less hospitable to U.S. interests. It is important to recognize, however, that networked authoritarian state power, while formidable, is not invincible. It has its own vulnerabilities. Free systems’ full range of societal power, when applied intentionally and systematically, is more resilient and potent than the dead-end prescription on offer from the autocrats. Countries are likelier to flourish in the long run, and be partners in a durable peace, when businesses can grow and thrive without depending on the favor of the ruling party, journalists can shine a light on threats to the public’s well-being, and the checks and balances of representative government give all parts of society a say in the nation’s political direction.

Civil society has a fundamental role to play in this regard. This is why the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its partner organizations have supported dedicated, courageous people

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United States House of Representatives, November 30, 2023, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Discourse-Power-CCP-Strategy-to-Shape-the-Global-Information-Space-Christopher-Walker-testimony-November-2023.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> “Deepening the Response to Authoritarian Information Operations in Latin America,” National Endowment for Democracy, November 28, 2023, <https://www.ned.org/deepening-the-response-to-authoritarian-information-operations-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>20</sup> “Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence,” National Endowment for Democracy, December 5, 2017, <https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence-forum-report/>.

on the ground who are standing up for their own freedoms, and working in a systematic and intentional way to cut through authoritarians' sophisticated, cross-border efforts to normalize censorship and surveillance, keep people divided and afraid, and cloak their moves to consolidate global power in a web of opacity.

The principal adversaries of the United States are authoritarian states with a deep-rooted hostility to our country, our allies, and our values and institutions. In the context of today's global competition, NED helps to challenge these regimes, and keep the world better informed of emerging threats, by supporting local citizen efforts to advance freedom. With a focus on empowering local groups that challenge oppression abroad, NED addresses sources of instability before they become crises that impact U.S. security and cost American taxpayers.

NED helps counter threats from authoritarian regimes like Iran, Russia, North Korea, Cuba, and China. For instance, groups that NED supports fight CCP censorship and document the Party's egregious persecution against religious minorities and Chinese dissidents abroad. These groups also expose CCP corruption around the world. Given the predatory and corrupting approach that is part and parcel of China and its fellow autocracies' approach to foreign investment, development projects, and security cooperation, such exposure is crucial for safeguarding critical rule of law standards, while defending against autocrats' cooptation of foreign leaders and distortion of competition and free markets.

Fundamentally, a civil society sector that is knowledgeable about and alert to the risks of engagement with global authoritarian powers is integral to this contest. Journalists, human rights monitors, advocates for the rights of religious minorities, and other independent voices contribute to greater transparency and informed policymaking. The information and analysis they provide also serves as a vital line of defense that reinforces institutional integrity, sovereignty, and a competitive playing field within free societies under assault from sharp power.

Democratic systems need to recognize the challenges presented by networked authoritarianism. Unfree systems are mounting a concerted effort to undermine, weaken, and ultimately dominate free societies, which themselves must undertake a far more cohesive response that leverages the competitive advantages of free systems. All too often, democratic institutions and their leaders have placed themselves at a disadvantage, either through complacency or inadequate preparation — or some combination of them.

Therefore, free systems will need a decidedly different scope and quality of preparation.

Democratic governments and nongovernmental organizations alike must do a more comprehensive job of explaining the threats that stem from Beijing's secretive and often corrupting practices, which its authoritarian partners amplify. A clearer understanding of the downsides of cooperation with the authoritarians and their proxies will help countries avoid making choices that compromise institutional integrity, thereby reducing the autocrats' competitive advantage, especially in the commercial sphere.

## **The Bottom Line**

Let me take a moment to punctuate the points made in this testimony: China is actively and purposefully seeking to displace the United States as the world's most influential country. The leadership in Beijing has laid out a "blueprint" for doing so.<sup>21</sup>

This shift would amount to much more than a shuffling of the chairs at international forums. China's leadership aims to pull countries into its orbit, gain privileged access to markets, ports, and natural resources from governments economically and technologically dependent on Beijing, and assault the remaining bastions where people are free to criticize the CCP. The broader coalition of repressive regimes is keen to see the U.S. retreat from the world, so that they can amplify their influence within their respective geographic regions and tighten their control where it already exists.

This vision includes a more prominent role for Cuba in Latin America, Iran in the Middle East, Russia in Europe and Eurasia, and so forth. It would exacerbate the global challenges—from Russia's military aggression, to Cuba's support for destructive dictatorships in Venezuela and Nicaragua, to Iran's state sponsorship of terrorism—that are fueling migration flows and creating insecurity globally. It would also fuel the spread of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century, tech-powered authoritarian model that fundamentally challenges not only the maintenance of a competitive playing field for commerce and for ideas, but the very existence of zones of individual free thought, association, and expression safeguarded from the ever-present threat of state surveillance and control.

To achieve this, these regimes must delegitimize the ideas and political systems of the U.S. and its allies, corrode international confidence in democracies, and undermine their ties both to governments and to people in the countries where they are seeking to build their sway. The path to realizing authoritarian ambitions runs through not only suppressing the political rights and information access of people currently living under authoritarian regimes, but eroding those rights in societies that currently enjoy them—leaving the CCP and regional authoritarian powers new leeway to co-opt political systems and spread the technologies of repression untroubled by the civil society efforts to shine daylight on these activities. Such a world, should the authoritarians bring it about, unquestionably would be one of diminished American stature, security, and economic opportunity.

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<sup>21</sup> Schuman, Fulton, and Gering, "How Beijing's Newest Global Initiatives Seek to Remake the World Order."