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### Foreign Election Interference and Hybrid Warfare

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FOREIGN ELECTION INTERFERENCE AND HYBRID WARFARE

By: Jonathan Davies

An Independent Study Thesis  
submitted to the Department of Political Science  
at the College of Wooster  
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements of I.S. Thesis

Advisor: Dr. Jeffrey Lantis

Second Reader: Dr. John Valdez

## **Abstract**

Election interference has long been a tool of foreign policy available to state actors but has recently risen in prominence as a result of Russia's efforts to influence the 2016 presidential election in the United States. Although much has been written about election interference, most existing scholarship focuses on its use to promote a certain candidate or party. Hybrid warfare theory, which posits that modern conflict is increasingly characterized by the coordinated use of a wide range of tactics, provides a powerful alternative framework for understanding election interference. This Independent Study considers election interference through the lens of hybrid warfare theory, conceptualizing it as a tactic of hybrid warfare that can be used to intensify internal divisions within a target state. Using the comparative case study methodology, this study seeks to investigate how foreign election interference affects internal divisions, and how changes in these divisions impact a state's foreign policy. Three cases in which interference is widely thought to have occurred are examined: the 2016 American presidential election, the 2018 Taiwanese local elections, and the 2016 "Brexit" referendum. Analysis of these cases reveals that election interference caused an intensification of internal divisions in all three countries where it occurred. However, the intensification of these divisions did not appear to undermine the ability of these states to implement foreign policy. These results suggest that hybrid warfare theory provides a useful way to understand election interference and demonstrate the need for additional research in this area.

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## Introduction

The events of the American presidential election of 2016 catapulted the topic of election interference to the forefront of public discourse in the United States. The realization that foreign adversaries had undermined the integrity of the presidential race, and could do so again, has brought new urgency to the task of understanding how election interference affects democratic societies. Of course, election interference is not a new phenomenon. The United States, the Soviet Union, and other great powers have engaged in countless instances of election interference in foreign countries, and research suggests that a majority of elections carried out since World War II were impacted by some kind of foreign intervention (Bubeck and Marinov 1989, 111). However, the recent prominence of election interference has made it more important than ever to understand its impact on democratic states.

This Independent Study argues that election interference is often a key tactic of hybrid warfare campaigns. Such interference seeks primarily to exacerbate internal divisions within the country that it targets through tactics such as the dissemination of disinformation and cyberattacks against key institutions and political actors. Thus, I hypothesize that election interference campaigns will intensify the internal divisions of the target state. I expect this to have a detrimental effect on the state's ability to conduct foreign policy. A more divided political establishment should have a harder time agreeing on priorities, implementing policy, and responding to challenges from foreign actors. As a result, I

hypothesize that targets of election interference will be more likely to make significant foreign policy concessions to their adversaries.

This Independent Study will draw on studies of election interference in the United States and other countries, but will be primarily grounded in hybrid warfare theory. Specifically, I conceptualize election interference as a tactic of hybrid warfare. Although definitions of hybrid warfare vary, I consider it to be the coordinated use of conventional and unconventional instruments of foreign policy, including military or proxy forces, information warfare, and covert operations, to destabilize an adversary (Grigalashvili 2020). Most importantly, hybrid warfare thrives on ambiguity, eschewing overt military confrontation in favor of operating in a “grey area” between war and peace (Grigalashvili 2020, 101). This characteristic can make it difficult for target states to determine if a hybrid war is even taking place, which complicates the formulation of an effective response. Due to its high degree of deniability, low cost, and relative effectiveness, election interference fits perfectly into the paradigm of hybrid warfare.

Like many instruments of hybrid warfare, election interference is most effective when it can take advantage of existing societal divisions. Scholarship by Darin Johnson and others insightfully points out that racial tension and other internal divisions in American society were exploited by Russian intelligence services to support the Trump campaign and spread discontent (Johnson 2019, 196). Johnson argues that Russia sought to destabilize and delegitimize the American political process above all else, with the promotion of a specific candidate being relegated to a secondary objective (Johnson 2019, 202). This conception of



Russian goals in 2016 is consistent with the idea that Russia was engaging in hybrid warfare against the United States.

This Independent Study will employ the comparative case study methodology. This is the best approach because the variables in this study can only be coded through careful and intensive investigation of each case of election interference. The need for rigorous investigation of a small number of cases is also increased because acts of election interference may not be discernible at first glance due to their covert nature. This study will therefore focus on three cases: the 2016 American Presidential election, the 2016 Brexit Referendum, and the 2018 local elections in Taiwan. The independent variable will be the intensity of election interference and the dependent variable will be the degree to which concessions are offered to foreign adversaries. The degree to which internal divisions are intensified will be the intervening variable. I will create indices for each of these variables and observe how they evolve throughout an election cycle in order to test my hypotheses.

In conclusion, this Independent Study should help elucidate the impact of election interference campaigns on democratic societies. It will test the hypotheses that election interference exacerbates internal divisions within its targets and that victims of election interference will offer foreign policy concessions to adversaries as a result of these divisions. Careful analysis of several recent cases of election interference should provide a good initial test of these hypotheses and possibly shed light on other mechanisms by which election interference affects democratic societies. In any event, this research should help us better understand election interference and work towards methods of defending against it.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Theory and Literature Review**

This chapter surveys literature on hybrid warfare theory before moving on to a discussion of election interference. Although the concept of hybrid warfare was originally developed in the early 2000s, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 propelled it to new prominence and spurred renewed academic discussion of its utility. Proponents of hybrid warfare theory argue that it provides a new and useful way to understand modern conflicts, which often involve the simultaneous use of conventional and unconventional military tactics in conjunction with cyber and information warfare. They assert that traditional concepts of conflict with stark divisions between war and peace fail to capture the complexity of hybrid tactics that disregard this distinction. However, some detractors claim that the concept of hybrid warfare is too nebulous to be useful, and others assert that warfare has not really changed in any fundamental sense. This remains an open and dynamic scholarly debate.

For this study, election interference is conceptualized as a tool of hybrid warfare which can be used to undermine the strength and legitimacy of a target state. It is ideally suited to this role thanks to its potential deniability, inexpensive nature, and effectiveness at exploiting internal divisions within target states. Moreover, modern technologies such as social media, the internet, and even artificial intelligence facilitate election interference by making it easier than ever before to create and disseminate disinformation. Deterrence of election interference is very difficult because it does not conform to traditional concepts of

warfare. Not all election interference can be classified as hybrid warfare. However, intervention in a state's democratic processes can be a key component of such aggression because of its ability to undermine the foundations of a target's government, society, and popular legitimacy.

### **An Introduction to Hybrid Warfare**

Hybrid warfare is a relatively new concept that has been defined and conceptualized in a variety of ways. The American war theorist Frank Hoffman was among the first to address hybrid warfare, arguing that it represents a new kind of conflict characterized by the convergence of different modes of warfare (Hoffman, 34). He asserted that adversaries would increasingly employ a broad spectrum of conventional and unconventional forces simultaneously to target American vulnerabilities, rather than commit to purely conventional conflict. (Hoffman 35). Hoffman's conceptualization of hybrid warfare continues to underpin much of the current hybrid warfare scholarship. Although there is no consensus on an exact definition of hybrid warfare, it is widely thought to be characterized by several key traits.

First, hybrid warfare involves a fusion of conventional and unconventional tactics and forces. Traditional military formations can be complemented with or replaced by proxies such as terrorist fighters, paramilitary groups, militias, or even criminal organizations (Grigalashvili, 98). Hybrid conflicts feature several of these elements working in a coordinated fashion towards a common goal (Kilinskas, 146). The tactics used in hybrid warfare can be equally varied, including cyber attacks and information warfare in addition to

a wide range of physical violence. The 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, in which insurgent fighters used conventional weapons in conjunction with asymmetric terrorist and guerrilla tactics, exemplifies the multimodal nature of hybrid warfare (Kilinskas, 146). Hezbollah also expanded the conflict to the information domain, using the internet to highlight its victories and draw attention to the suffering caused by Israeli military actions (Jasper and Alexander, 51). Such information operations are widely believed to be an increasingly important component of hybrid warfare.

Second, some experts argue that information warfare will become the centerpiece of many future conflicts rather than a mere supporting tactic. The Russian general Vladimir Gerasimov has written that society, rather than territory, is now “the object and goal of war” (Kilinskas, 148). This implies that politics, economics, and information must be considered weapons in the struggle to influence the people of strategically important countries. The assertion that information warfare is an important aspect of modern conflict has been supported by Russia’s dissemination of false narratives during its invasions of Georgia and Crimea (Grigalashvili, 100). The 2017 U.S. National Defense Strategy concurs with Grigalashvili’s assessment, asserting that information warfare and subversion are key tactics that Russia uses to achieve its geopolitical objectives (Jasper and Alexander, 2).

Third, there is broad agreement that hybrid conflicts take place in an ambiguous regime between war and peace. Such conflicts rarely feature high-intensity conventional warfare. Hybrid attackers attempt to prevent escalation by using unconventional tactics and cultivating ambiguity regarding the nature of the conflict. Indeed, hybrid warfare often erodes the line between war and peace and occurs in the political “grey area” in between

(Kilinskas, 148). In contrast to traditional conflict, hybrid warfare relies heavily on covert operations such as espionage, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and election interference (Ornstein, 30). This affords aggressors plausible deniability, making a robust response more difficult to justify both domestically and internationally. Even overt hybrid warfare actions attempt to avoid escalation to open war through the use of asymmetric tactics (Aoi et. al., 697). This often entails using “non-kinetic” capabilities, such as cyberattacks and information warfare, that are unlikely to elicit a conventional response. These methods frequently exploit the ambiguous legal regimes governing cyberspace to complicate the response of target states (Johnson, 239).

Even states that openly use force in hybrid conflicts attempt to limit the risk of high-intensity war. The use of irregular units, such as militias and law enforcement agencies, can make conventional military responses look like unwarranted escalations. China’s use of its coast guard and maritime militias to enforce its territorial claims in the South China Sea is a prime example of this tactic (Aoi et. al., 696). Although these forces are far more powerful than their counterparts in any of China’s neighbors, attempts to fend them off with warships can easily be portrayed as escalatory. Russia has also used irregular forces to limit escalation. For instance, undercover special forces acting in conjunction with local paramilitary and criminal groups formed a key component of Russia’s invasion of Crimea (Kilinskas, 153). Conventional deterrence was also used, with 150,000 Russian troops stationed at the Ukrainian border under the guise of a military exercise serving as a stark reminder of the consequences of escalation (Kilinskas, 152). Clearly, the unconventional, ambiguous, and

multimodal nature of hybrid warfare gives aggressors a multitude of options for attaining their foreign policy goals while minimizing the possibility of dangerous escalation.

### **Hybrid Warfare as a Global Phenomenon**

Hybrid warfare is a useful concept for explaining low-intensity conflict throughout the world. For example, east Asian security experts Aoi, Futamura, and Patalano contend that hybrid warfare is increasingly used by states in the Asia-Pacific region. They envision hybrid warfare as the mobilization of both conventional and unconventional instruments of state power in an effort to remain below the level of open war (Aoi et. al. 2018, 693). This strategy has a long history in Asia but has been rendered more relevant than ever before by new technologies (Aoi et. al. 2018, 695).

China's force structure, doctrine, and recent behavior all suggest that hybrid warfare is an important part of its strategy. Many Chinese observers believe that the nature of warfare has changed, arguing "that contemporary wars are no longer about 'using armed forces to compel the enemy to submit to one's will, but instead using all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one's interests'" (Ong 2018, 749). This mindset is not an entirely new development. For instance, the Chinese navy has a history of supplementing its conventional forces with irregular maritime militias (Ong 2018, 747). Moreover, China has long embraced the concept of a "people's war" that blurs the lines between civilians and military personnel (Ong 2018, 747). These trends have only intensified as China seeks to gain power in the

Asia-Pacific region. For instance, China's maritime militias have "evolved into an enormous twenty-first century irregular sea force" that can be used below the level of open warfare (Ong 2018, 747). Although these militias often perform civilian tasks such as fishing, they have received military training and are known to carry weapons and advanced communications equipment provided by the Chinese government (Patalano 2018, 823). China's coast guard also has significant coercive potential, possessing dozens of heavily armed ships, at least 24 of which displace over 3,000 tons (Patalano 2018, 822). China has complemented these forces with "information warfare militias" that leverage the power of non-governmental entities and ostensibly civilian organizations to disseminate propaganda (Ong 2018, 747). Indeed, the Chinese Communist Party has enshrined such tactics in its most recent 5 year plan, which advocates a concept of "Civil-Military Fusion" (Ong 2018, 746).

China expects "non-kinetic" tactics such as information warfare and cyberattacks to play a leading role in future conflicts. For instance, documents produced by the People's Liberation Army imply that information warfare is expected to play a "leading role" in war and to help prepare the ground before a conflict begins (Ong 2018, 746). Propaganda and disinformation could play a critical role in justifying Chinese actions and undermining international resolve to resist them in periods of low-intensity conflict (Patalano 2018, 827). Chinese experts also believe that cyberattacks will play an important role in degrading enemy military capabilities and destabilizing the politics of adversaries (Ong 2018, 746). Chinese cyber espionage campaigns have already attempted to compromise the security of many American companies and organizations, which could help lay the groundwork for future cyber warfare operations (Cunningham and Touhill, 10). Cyber warfare tactics have the

advantage of being inexpensive and deniable, making them attractive tools in hybrid conflicts where China wishes to avoid direct confrontation. Overall, China's development of cyber capabilities and emphasis on the role of information warfare suggest that it expects future conflicts to involve these non-kinetic elements. More broadly, concepts such as civil-military fusion demonstrate that Beijing does not limit its conception of warfare to conventional military domains. China's capabilities, doctrine, and history all suggest that hybrid warfare is an important part of its efforts to develop into a global superpower and assert control of the South China Sea.

### **Critiques of Hybrid Warfare Theory**

Although hybrid warfare theory has the potential to explain many new trends in modern conflict, its utility has been questioned by some contemporary scholars. Expert on Russian security and defense policy Bettina Renz claims that hybrid warfare is fundamentally nothing new. She asserts that tactics such as information warfare, sabotage, and the use of proxy fighters have been in use for many years, making Russia's "hybrid" offensive in Ukraine merely an extension of earlier trends (Renz, 2). Moreover, Russia's success in Ukraine was contingent upon favorable circumstances and does not prove the general utility of a new doctrine of warfare (Renz, 2). Renz cautions against applying the concept of hybrid warfare to Russian foreign policy in general, arguing that this oversimplifies Russian behavior while offering little useful insight. The multitude of definitions of hybrid warfare proposed by western observers only exacerbate this problem. Finally, Renz points out that Russia itself has only adopted hybrid warfare to a limited extent, and considers the term itself



a product of western propaganda (Renz, 4). This interpretation is supported by Russia's steadily increasing funding for conventional weapons such as tanks, aircraft, and missiles, which suggests that its military planners are focused on preparedness for more traditional forms of conflict (Renz, 10).

Even proponents of hybrid warfare theory have voiced some concerns. Aoi et. al. emphasize the importance of geopolitical context and caution against attributing successful foreign policy outcomes solely to hybrid warfare (Aoi et. al. 2018, 696). They also agree with Renz that hybrid warfare is not entirely new and not formally enshrined in Russian doctrine (Aoi et. al. 699). Kilinskas concurs with the assertion that hybrid warfare has significant historical precedent, pointing out that the Soviet Union and Germany both attempted to covertly undermine the sovereignty of their neighbors in the 20th century (Kilinskas 2016, 140).

In short, the usefulness of hybrid warfare theory remains a topic of scholarly debate. Skeptics broadly agree that, despite sensationalized claims, hybrid warfare is neither a universal war winning strategy nor an entirely new phenomenon. Moreover, they contend that Russian mastery of hybrid warfare has been overstated, pointing to the fact that the concept still has its skeptics in the Kremlin. The novelty of hybrid warfare has also been contested, with many viewing it as a mere extension of previous trends. Although there is some merit to these criticisms, hybrid warfare theory remains a useful way to understand changes in modern conflict in the context of new technological and political developments.

## **Emerging Hybrid Capabilities**

As outlined above, many of the tactics associated with modern hybrid warfare have been used throughout history. However, new technologies have created new vulnerabilities which have empowered hybrid aggressors to an unprecedented extent. Information warfare is now more potent than ever before thanks to the power of the internet to disseminate propaganda, and the increasing military and political importance of cyberspace has created new possibilities for foreign adversaries.

The Internet has become an indispensable part of modern life as we know it. Over the past 5 years more online data has been generated than in the rest of human history put together (Cunningham and Touhill, 1). The internet underpins the global economy, provides billions of people with their main source of news, and is a key forum for political discourse. As a result, cyberspace has become an important domain in which states attempt to attain supremacy. Cyber attacks are now an indispensable component of hybrid warfare and will likely play an even greater role in the future. The versatility, deniability, and effectiveness of cyberattacks combine to make them an ideal tactic for hybrid aggressors. Such attacks are incredibly flexible with effects ranging from the disruption of electrical grids to the theft of classified information. (Jasper and Alexander). They can be extremely disruptive, as demonstrated by the 2017 NotPetya virus that crippled the networks of the global shipping giant Maersk and caused billions of dollars in damage worldwide (Cunningham and Touhill, 29). Moreover, victims of cyber warfare often have limited legal recourse given the ambiguous nature of international law governing cyberspace (Ohlin, 7).

Cyberattacks have played a role in several hybrid warfare campaigns thanks to their accessibility, effectiveness, and deniability. In 2007 Russia launched a major cyberattack against Estonia, crippling government services, news outlets, and online banking for several weeks (Jasper and Alexander, 33). This attack demonstrated that even rudimentary cyber operations can severely undermine the stability of an entire country. Russian invasions of Georgia and Crimea were also accompanied by cyber warfare which aimed to weaken their resistance (Jasper and Alexander). Cyber attacks have clearly opened up a myriad array of new vulnerabilities that can be exploited in a hybrid war.

Artificial intelligence has the potential to tremendously increase the amount of disinformation produced by malicious actors. One of the most concerning recent developments is the use of AI to produce highly convincing fabricated videos known as “deepfakes”. Such videos are produced by feeding existing images or videos of a target into a deep learning algorithm. With enough input, these algorithms can produce high-quality video of a target saying or doing almost anything (Cunningham and Touhill, 108). A study by the graphics card company Nvidia even succeeded in using machine learning techniques to fabricate high-fidelity images of people who never existed (Cunningham and Touhill, 112). Although such manipulation has long been within the grasp of computer generated imagery, it once required skilled animators and long periods of time. Deepfakes are far more accessible, allowing amateurs without any specialized skills or equipment to quickly create manipulated content (Kietzmann, 136).

At the same time, the development of social media has provided the perfect platform for the dissemination of this disinformation. Malicious actors have learned to adroitly

manipulate algorithms governing what content is shown to users in order to quickly spread false narratives (Cunningham and Touhill, 88). For instance, in their attempt to interfere in the 2016 U.S. election, Russian operatives created fake accounts that claimed to be affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement and the Tennessee Republican Party (Mueller, 22). These were collectively able to accrue millions of followers and reach tens of millions of people, in part because some of them were retweeted by prominent politicians and commentators (Mueller, 22). Russian-sponsored internet trolls were also instrumental in spreading false narratives that alleged, for example, that Hillary Clinton favored making women eligible for selective service (Cunningham and Touhill, 92).

Overall, it is clear that modern technology has provided hybrid aggressors with a formidable arsenal of new capabilities. Cyberattacks are perhaps the most serious of these emerging threats given their comparatively low cost, deniability, and proven ability to cause mayhem. Moreover, they are highly versatile and can be used for purposes ranging from espionage to crippling attacks on critical infrastructure. Artificial intelligence and social media also have the potential to be potent instruments of hybrid warfare thanks to their ability to create and disseminate unprecedented quantities of disinformation. To summarize, technological advances have made hybrid warfare more threatening than ever before, and future developments are likely to exacerbate this challenge.

### **Hybrid Warfare and Election Interference**

Given that hybrid warfare breaks down the distinction between civilian and military domains, many experts have expressed concern that hybrid attacks might profoundly affect domestic politics. Mitchell Ornstein, professor of Eastern European studies at the University of Pennsylvania, discusses the impact of hybrid warfare on the internal politics of states in eastern Europe and examines the lessons that can be learned from their experiences. He contends that since 2007 Russia has pursued an “all out, mainly covert, political war on the west” (Ornstein, 10). This operation has relied on covert measures, such as support for extreme political parties, information warfare, and hacking, which afford Russia a degree of plausible deniability (ibid). Ornstein argues that this hybrid attack on the west aims to destabilize western democracies, divide the European Union, and fracture alliances such as NATO in order to weaken opposition to Russian actions (ibid). Unfortunately, responding to this aggression is not a simple task. Although Ornstein believes that Russian hybrid warfare began in 2007, most western leaders did not recognize that an attack was underway until the 2014 invasion of Crimea (Ornstein 47). Even now, despite overwhelming evidence, many American politicians refuse to acknowledge Russian interference in the 2016 election. Moreover, responses to hybrid aggression have been dubiously effective, with even the toughest sanctions failing to change Russian behavior (Ornstein 2019, 56).

Russia’s intervention in the 2016 U.S. election can be seen as the most recent clash in this continuing hybrid assault on western countries. Professor of Russian and eastern European history Patryk Babiracki argues that foreign attempts to sway the presidential race in favor of Donald Trump were part of a broader campaign of hybrid aggression (Babiracki 2018, 1). In addition to supporting the Trump campaign through selective leaks of sensitive

information and dissemination of propaganda, Russia sought to weaken the very fabric of American society. Much of the disinformation spread by Russian operatives sought to “blur the lines between truth, falsehood, and reality” rather than advance any coherent narrative (Babiracki 2018, 3). This promotion of discord and uncertainty exemplifies hybrid warfare’s focus on degrading an adversary’s society rather than promoting one’s own (Babiracki 2018, 4).

Scholar Darin Johnson addresses the implications of the threat of election interference for the United States. He argues that the employment of hybrid tactics by America’s enemies compel it to address festering domestic problems as if they were national security vulnerabilities. Failure to do this can create opportunities for foreign adversaries. For instance, Johnson argues that racial strife in the United States created a weakness that was exploited by Russian operatives during the 2016 election. Indeed, he claims that “racial division was fundamental to Russia’s interference campaign”, with over half of Russian ads on Facebook attempting to leverage this disunity (Johnson 2019, 203). Moreover, much of Russia’s disinformation activity was more concerned with increasing racial and political animosity than with promoting a particular candidate (Johnson 2019, 202). This view is corroborated by the fact that Russia supported both sides of many hot-button issues. For instance, the Internet Research Agency collaborated with white supremacists to spread hateful and divisive rhetoric while simultaneously encouraging Black Americans to form armed self-defense organizations (Johnson 2019, 202). Russian agents also attempted to suppress minority turnout by falsely alleging racist behavior on the part of Democratic politicians such as Beto O’Rourke, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren (Johnson 2019,

209). This relentless exploitation of racial divisions by Russian operatives convinced Johnson that these societal fractures must be considered national security vulnerabilities with the potential to undermine American resilience to foreign aggression (Johnson 2019, 249).

Although Russian attempts to spread discord in the United States are not unprecedented, the interference campaign of 2016 leveraged new technologies to be far more effective than previous efforts. With powerful new tools such as cyberattacks and internet-facilitated information warfare, hybrid strategies pose a serious threat against which physical distance is no defense. States can no longer rely solely on their militaries for security but must look to strengthen their societies as well. Just as globalization has reduced the significance of state borders, hybrid warfare threatens to reduce the significance of the front line, exposing economic, societal, political, and military targets to unconventional attack at any time and in any place. Election interference, which represents a direct attack on the foundations of societal order and government legitimacy, is one of the most salient and concerning aspects of this new paradigm of warfare. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to deter due to its deniability and ambiguous standing in international law. To combat hybrid threats such as election interference, western democracies must strengthen their societies and present a united front against foreign interference.

### **Introduction to Election Interference**

Election interference has a long history as an instrument of foreign policy. Despite the common perception that elections are purely domestic in nature, in reality they are

inextricably linked with international relations. Different candidates and parties often have radically different policies on issues that affect outside actors, creating strong incentives for election interference. For this reason, states have often attempted to sway electoral outcomes in other countries throughout the past few decades (Ohlin, 10). In their book *Rules and Allies*, Bubeck and Marinov define election interference as “a deliberate attempt by a foreign government to change the electoral rule or the election outcome” (Bubeck and Marinov, 45). As this definition implies, Bubeck and Marinov categorize electoral interventions into two groups: candidate interventions and process interventions (ibid). States can combine these tactics to achieve their goals, influencing either the appeal of particular candidates, the rules of the election, or both. The authors argue that states intervene in elections for two main reasons: pragmatic geopolitical concerns and normative preferences for democracy (Bubeck and Marinov, 12). Overall, they find that election interference is quite common, occurring in approximately 65% of their sample of post World War II elections (Bubeck and Marinov, 112). Most scholars concur that election interference has been a common phenomenon in recent history, especially during periods of great power competition such as the Cold War (Ohlin, 10).

The election interference literature suggests that the appeal of intervention depends on two key characteristics of the target state: political polarization and strategic importance to the intervener. Unsurprisingly, election intervention seems to be more likely in states that are strategically important to the intervener (Bubeck and Marinov, 55). It is also widely agreed that political polarization will create incentives for states to intervene in elections (Bubeck and Marinov, Johnson). The more candidates’ policy positions differ, the more an intervener



can make a difference by influencing the result. The average difference between candidates tends to be larger in polarized elections. Political polarization can also encourage election interference by making it easier (Johnson). In many polarized countries opportunistic politicians attempt to align themselves with outside actors in exchange for support, making it easier for interveners to promote certain policy outcomes (Ornstein, 6). This dynamic may have encouraged interference in the 2016 U.S. election, in which candidate Trump openly asked for Russian support (Ohlin, 192). Overall, existing scholarship suggests that election interference will be appealing when the target is strategically important and politically polarized.

On the other hand, Bubeck and Marinov argue that some states have normative preferences for democracy that impel them to intervene in elections in which they have little geostrategic interest. These competing motivations can sometimes produce seemingly incoherent policy. For instance, in the waning days of the Mubark regime, the United States provided support for democratic organizations in Egypt while simultaneously financing an authoritarian government that was actively repressing them (Bubeck and Marinov, 16). Thus, in its effort to promote democracy while continuing to advance its geopolitical interests, the American government pursued a process intervention that favored the opposition and a candidate intervention that favored the incumbent.

States often choose to balance process and candidate interventions for more pragmatic reasons as well. For example, even if a state has no intrinsic preference for democracy, it might attempt to promote a fair election process if it wishes to help a challenger defeat an incumbent (Bubeck and Marinov, 50). This is often an effective tactic in

conjunction with support for a specific candidate, given that reducing bias “makes the relationship between the support for a certain candidate within the electorate and the final vote share more direct” (Bubeck and Marinov, 53). Thus, every dollar spent supporting a candidate counts for more if the electoral process is fair. More broadly, election interference is generally carried out using a variety of tactics simultaneously in order to maximize its effectiveness (Ohlin, 10). For instance, states may support hostile candidates in order to divide opposition to their preferred contender. Russia’s intervention in the 2016 American election exemplified this tactic, supporting Bernie Sanders in order to siphon votes away from Hillary Clinton (Ohlin, 13). This combination of a variety strategies makes sense given that any one tool of election interference tends to suffer from diminishing returns.

### **Hybridized Election Interference**

Election interference tends to have distinct characteristics when deployed as a tool of hybrid warfare. This *hybridized election interference* is defined by its concern with inflicting damage on the target and by its integration into a broader hybrid warfare effort. The primary goal of such interference is simply to inflict as much damage as possible on the target state. Rather than encourage the implementation of a particular policy, it aims to diminish the target’s ability to enact *any* coherent policy. This allows the intervener to gain an advantage in the international arena. Hybridized interference is likely to adopt both candidate and process interventions, but these will be geared towards the erosion of political institutions and societal cohesion. For instance, an intervener may promote anti-democratic, extremist, or

populist candidates who would undermine a target's political system while simultaneously fomenting the discontent, division, and cynicism that allow such candidates to flourish. Thus, although its goals are radically different from tradition election interference, hybridized interference can use similar tactics.

### **Defense against Election Interference**

Some scholarly literature and government sponsored research has considered the question of how to defend against foreign election interference. Unfortunately, many factors conspire to make effective countermeasures exceedingly difficult. Election interference is almost impossible to deter and the domains in which it is carried out tend to favor offensive operations.

Deterrence of election interference is extremely difficult for a variety of reasons. Because election interference is generally covert, states engaging in this behavior will enjoy plausible deniability in many cases. This makes attribution of election interference difficult, which is a serious impediment to a credible deterrence policy. Even if a nation can determine the identity of its attacker, finding an effective response is difficult. Criminal proceedings against individuals engaged in election interference will be impractical because interveners will simply claim innocence and refuse to extradite them (Johnson, 242). The ambiguity of international law complicates the problem of deterring election interference. In fact, there is no consensus that election interference is even illegal under current frameworks (Ohlin, 3). The well-defined international norms regarding attacks carried out by conventional forces simply do not exist in the realm of election interference.

Defense against information and cyber warfare is also problematic. The very characteristics of western democracies, such as openness and freedom of speech, can make it harder to crack down on disinformation (Chivvis, 319). The nature of democracy, which thrives on contested elections in which different policy positions are offered, will always make election interference a tempting option for foreign actors that wish to gain influence (Chivvis, 319). Even if western democracies were not constrained by these factors, combating cyber warfare and disinformation would be difficult because these tactics inherently favor the aggressor. For instance, cyber attackers only need to succeed once to compromise a system, whereas defenders must foil every attempted intrusion (Cunningham and Touhill). Moreover, some of the most capable malware ever devised is freely available on the internet, meaning that even relatively primitive attackers have cutting edge capabilities (Cunningham and Touhill, 20).

However, despite the difficulty of combating election interference, some solutions have been proposed. As Darin Johnson and others have articulated, addressing internal divisions may help limit the vulnerability of western societies to foreign meddling. Eliminating the sources of these divisions may be difficult, but could eliminate some of the vulnerabilities that foreign adversaries have exploited (Johnson, 256). Encouraging social media companies to remove deceptive or hateful posts and passing legislation requiring online political ads to adhere to certain standards of truthfulness could also help combat foreign disinformation campaigns (Johnson, 255). In a similar vein, efforts to combat corruption, raise awareness of foreign disinformation campaigns, and limit corrosive political polarization could make it harder for would-be interveners to influence political discourse

(Chivvis, 319). Less ambitious proposals suggest that investments in cybersecurity could yield significant dividends. In his testimony before Congress, Frank Taylor, executive director of a nonprofit cybersecurity organization, advocated for increased cybersecurity efforts for political campaigns (United States, 14). This could limit the ability of foreign actors to influence election by leaking stolen information or attempting to blackmail candidates. Defending against election interference with complete success will always be difficult, but there are certainly steps that states can take to reduce their vulnerability.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This Independent Study seeks to investigate election interference as a tactic of hybrid warfare. As outlined in Chapter 1, neither election interference nor hybrid warfare are entirely new phenomena. However, modern technologies such as social media and cyber espionage have greatly increased the threat of election interference by malicious actors. Such interference can be used by foreign adversaries as part of a broader campaign of hybrid warfare. Rather than seeking to influence the result of an election, hybridized election interference primarily aims to undermine the foundations of a target's society by exacerbating internal divisions. This could provide an intervener with a significant geopolitical advantage by diminishing the target's ability to enact effective foreign policy. Hybridized interference also poses a grave threat to the legitimacy and stability of democratic governments, calling into question the elections that form the basis for their existence.

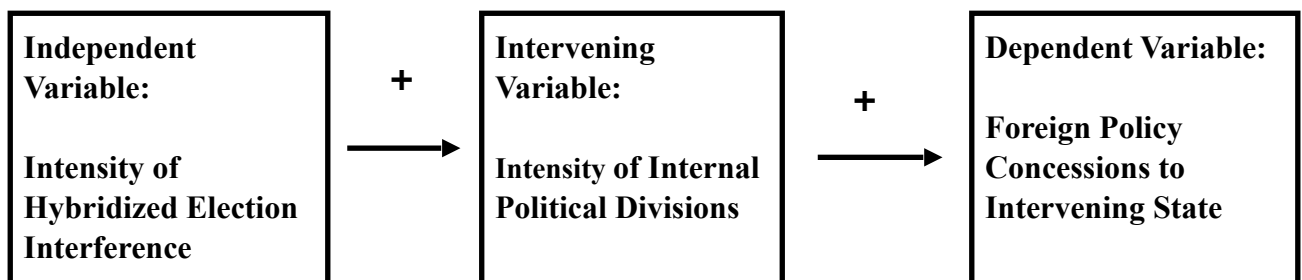
The independent variable in this study is the level of hybridized election interference conducted by a foreign state. The dependent variable is the degree to which a target of election interference offers tangible foreign policy concessions to this adversary. There is one intervening variable: the degree to which a target's internal divisions intensify during and immediately after an election. I will employ the comparative case study methodology to examine two primary hypotheses. I hypothesize that hybridized election interference will

intensify internal divisions in the target state, and that these divisions will make states more likely to offer foreign policy concessions to adversaries.

### **Hypotheses and Causal Mechanisms**

In this Independent Study, I will test two primary hypotheses. Firstly, I hypothesize that hybridized election interference will lead to an intensification of political and social divisions within a target state. Indeed, promotion of these divisions is often the primary tactic of hybrid interveners. Secondly, I hypothesize that these internal divisions will make a state more likely to offer foreign policy concessions to its adversaries. This will be the case because states consumed by internal divisions will be less willing and able to compete with their opponents in the international arena. Thus, foreign policy concessions are a result of the intense internal divisions that hybridized election interference seeks to exacerbate.

Figure 1: Research Design for the Study of Election Interference



### **Independent Variable**

The independent variable in this study is the level of hybridized election interference. Existing literature has identified information warfare operations, such as the dissemination of propaganda on social media, as key aspects of hybridized interference (Johnson; Mueller). For this reason, information warfare activities should be a good indicator of the overall intensity of an election intervention. I will therefore create an index of three metrics related to information warfare in order to measure hybridized election interference. Each of these will be coded low, medium, or high using a scale ranging from 0 to 2. The sum of these numbers will indicate the intensity of hybridized election interference, which can range from a minimum value of 0 to a maximum of 6. Because election interference campaigns may begin well in advance of the vote that they seek to influence (Babiracki), this study will consider election interference activities starting up to 1 year before the election of interest and continuing through the last day of voting.

The prevalence of foreign information warfare on social media is among the most important indicators of election interference (Cunningham and Touhill). Such activity often involves the use of “troll” accounts or “content farms” to promote a narrative or sow division. State-sponsored efforts to disseminate false or misleading information on social media are also considered examples of information warfare. In each case, I will assess the extent to which these behaviors influenced voters in the target state. The intensity of information warfare on social media will be coded as high (2) if large numbers of voters were



influenced. Signs of high-intensity information warfare would include widespread belief in false narratives promoted by foreign governments or frequent examples of foreign “troll” accounts reaching large numbers of people. If online information warfare clearly took place but was more limited in influence, its intensity will be coded as medium (1). Finally, if there is no evidence that information warfare on social media reached a significant number of people, its intensity will be coded as low (0).

I will also examine the reach of foreign information warfare on more traditional media platforms. Viewership of propaganda mouthpieces such as *Russia Today*, *Sputnik*, and the *Global Times* in countries experiencing election interference could be a key indicator of the success of foreign governments in disseminating their narrative (Templeman). Foreign actors may also co-opt local media outlets through bribes or collusion with influential business leaders. The intensity of foreign information warfare through traditional media will be coded as high (2) if media outlets that are heavily influenced by foreign governments play a major role in shaping the narrative surrounding an election. If foreign media outlets have significant influence but are still overshadowed by independent sources of information, the intensity of information warfare through traditional media will be coded as medium (1). This metric will be coded as low (0) if foreign media sources fail to have a noticeable impact on public discourse surrounding the election being studied.

Finally, foreign attempts to influence the political process through cyber warfare will be considered. The number of significant politically motivated cyberattacks attributable to foreign adversaries will be determined. If there are no such attacks this metric will be coded as low (0) and if there are one or two it will be coded as medium (1). Three or more attacks

will be coded as high (2). Cyber attacks will be considered politically motivated if they are directed against political parties, candidates, or electoral institutions. However, attacks that merely gather intelligence without attempting to inflict damage or disseminate compromising material will not be counted.

### **Dependent Variable**

The dependent variable in this Independent Study is the degree to which a state's foreign policy becomes more favorable to the country that interfered in its election. Achieving foreign policy concessions through the intensification of another state's internal divisions may be an important goal of many hybridized election interference campaigns. Because these divisions may last for a significant period of time, this study will consider foreign policy changes made up to two years after an election in which interference occurred. Foreign policy concessions could take many forms.

I will focus on three main metrics to assess changes in a state's foreign policy. The first metric that will be examined is military posture, which encompasses doctrine, military spending, and participation in military conflicts that involve the intervening state or its allies. The second is economic policy towards the intervening state, including sanctions, tariffs, and openness to trade. Domestic economic policies such as stimulus spending and interest rate adjustments will not be considered. The final aspect of foreign policy that will be examined is a state's diplomatic alignment. This includes factors such as alliance structure,

participation in international organizations, and willingness to cooperate with the intervening state.

Each of these aspects of foreign policy will be coded with a number between -2 and 2, with the former signifying a strong shift to a *more* assertive foreign policy and the latter signifying major concessions. A value of zero denotes the absence of a policy change. These numbers will then be added to create an index of foreign policy concessions to foreign interveners, with a maximum value of 6 denoting sweeping concessions and a minimum value of -6 indicating a radical shift to a more assertive foreign policy.

### **Intervening Variable**

The intervening variable in this study is the intensification of internal divisions caused by election interference in a target state. The intensification of these divisions is often a primary goal of election interference campaigns. Potential increases in three key aspects of internal divisions will be examined and coded as low, medium, or high using a scale ranging from 0 to 2. This will be accomplished by the comparing pre- and post-election divisions in each category. The resulting numerical values will then be added to create an index of internal division intensification on a scale ranging from 0 to 6.

The first aspect of internal divisions that I will analyze is political polarization. This metric seeks to capture the level of division between a country's main political parties. Fortunately political polarization is often easily observable. Key indicators of increased polarization would include heightened partisan controversy on key policy issues, widening

gaps between the priorities of different parties, and routine passage of legislation through purely party-line votes. Increased polarization of public opinion along party lines could also indicate increased political divisions. On the other hand, effective inter-party cooperation would suggest that these divisions have not worsened.

Existing literature has also suggested that racial or ethnic animosity can be a key indicator of internal divisions (Johnson). Although these tensions can be quite difficult to measure, polling data gathered by organizations such as Pew Research and YouGov helps elucidate how citizens of various countries believe race relations have evolved over time. Major protests or incidents of racist violence may also suggest an increase in racial tensions. However, events of this nature often have domestic causes and cannot be assumed to result from election interference.

Finally, increased political extremism could indicate an intensification of internal divisions. Signs of extremism include widespread support for fringe political parties or movements, a decline in support for the rule of law, and any instances of political violence. Attempts by political actors to undermine key institutions or unlawfully exercise power would also suggest an increase in political extremism. Lastly, polling data indicating that large segments of the population view political opponents as enemies or consider political violence acceptable could be a key early warning of heightened political extremism.

## **Methodology**

This Independent Study will employ the comparative case study methodology. This approach is the best choice because it allows each instance of election interference to be studied and understood in great detail. This is a crucial advantage because the variables of interest in this study are often complex and nuanced. Quantifying the level of election interference, for example, requires detailed analysis of a wide range of activities carried out by a foreign country's various government agencies and proxies. The case study approach facilitates this work and allows research difficulties stemming from the covert nature of election interference campaigns to be overcome. Moreover, it provides the thorough understanding of a wide range of military, diplomatic, and economic factors that is necessary to code variables such as foreign policy changes. Thus, the case study approach is well suited to dealing with the time consuming process of understating complex variables.

The comparative case study approach is also ideal for understanding how variables change over time (Kaarbo and Beasley, 379). This is important because context matters when analyzing changes in the variables investigated by this study. For instance, simply knowing a state's policy at a certain point in time reveals very little about how that policy may have changed as a result of foreign election interference. Evaluating the hypotheses proposed in this study requires knowledge of how the variables change over time.

It should be noted that the comparative case study approach can have drawbacks in select circumstances. Critics charge that it cannot prove a causal relationship between two variables because it is impossible to verify that the results were not caused by other factors not considered by the study. A comparative case study method has the additional drawback of examining only a small number of cases, which makes it less likely that the results will be

statistically significant. It can also be quite easy for scholars to misinterpret case study results in order to support conclusions for which there is little evidence (Kaarbo and Beasley, 371). On the other hand, the versatility of the case study approach and its ability to test theoretical arguments even in the absence of large datasets set it apart from other methods (Kaarbo and Beasley, 375). Overall, a comparative case study approach is the best way to test my hypothesis and should provide some useful initial results.

### **Case Studies**

This Independent Study will examine the 2016 American Presidential Election, the 2018 local elections in Taiwan, and the 2016 Brexit referendum. These cases were selected because they represent a broad range of election interference campaigns with a wide variety of target states and interveners. This should ensure a high degree of external validity for any conclusions drawn from this study. The cases were also chosen in order to provide a high level of variance in the intensity of election interference so that analysis of its correlation with the other variables of interest can be performed. All of the selected cases will take place in countries with robust democratic elections given that interference in an election whose outcome is predetermined would have little meaningful impact.

#### *United States Presidential Election, 2016*

Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election is one of the most well known examples of foreign electoral meddling. It is also among the most significant given

the crucial role played by the United States in the world and the major changes brought about as a result of Donald Trump's victory. Thanks to a wealth of official publications, such as the reports produced by Robert Mueller's Special Counsel investigation and by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, it is possible to build an unusually deep understanding of how election interference occurred in this case. Survey data for the United States is also more detailed than what is available in most other countries, which makes it substantially easier to code variables for the 2016 election cycle. Thus, this case provides a unique opportunity to improve our understanding of hybridized election interference.

#### *Taiwanese Local Elections, 2018*

Over the past several years few democracies have faced more external pressure at the hands of foreign adversaries than Taiwan. The People's Republic of China considers Taiwan to be an inseparable part of its territory and has engaged in a far-reaching campaign to prevent the island from moving towards official independence. Many observers believe that information warfare and election interference have played a key role in this effort. There have been numerous allegations that China interfered in Taiwan's 2018 local elections in order to weaken Tsai Ing-wen and the China-skeptic Democratic Progressive Party (Templeman). This case should provide a good example of the upper extreme of election interference intensity given that China is very close to Taiwan both geographically and culturally, is vastly larger and more powerful, and considers unification with the island to be a key foreign policy objective.

*“Brexit” Referendum, 2016*

The United Kingdom’s decision to withdraw from the European Union in a 2016 referendum was one of the most surprising political occurrences of the decade. This shocking outcome led to profound changes in the UK’s relationship with Europe and may have seriously undermined the cohesion of the EU. It has been widely suggested that Russia attempted to promote the Leave campaign in order to exacerbate divisions between its rivals. The Brexit case provides a useful example to study for several reasons. Thanks to the large number of English-language sources available, it is easier to study than many alternatives. Moreover, it provides an example of a referendum in which issues rather than candidates were on the ballot. It also may feature an example of a lower-intensity election interference campaign compared to the interventions in American and Taiwanese elections. Thus, the inclusion of the Brexit referendum provides a useful diversity in the cases that are examined. In short, this case is worthy of inclusion due to the wealth of available information, credible claims of Russian interference, and unique nature of the election being studied.



## Chapter 3

### The 2016 Presidential Elections in the United States

The 2016 presidential election was one of the most contentious in American history. It featured a contest between two starkly different candidates, both of whom were unusually unpopular. Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton was almost universally seen as the frontrunner throughout the campaign given her advantages in experience, political connections, and more conventional policies. On the other hand, Donald Trump was an unlikely candidate with no experience in government and a penchant for inflammatory rhetoric that many believed would damage his chances. The American intelligence community has reached a near-consensus that Russia embarked on an intense and far-reaching campaign of election interference designed to undermine Clinton's legitimacy and exacerbate America's internal political divisions (Mueller). A wide range of tactics were used to damage Clinton and promote Trump, including cyberattacks on the Democratic Party, disinformation on social media, and attempts to compromise the voting systems of all 50 states (United States). On election day this interference seemed to pay off, with Trump winning an improbable victory that divided the country to an almost unprecedented extent. This case study will attempt to put the events of 2016 in context, determine the intensity of Russian information warfare, and elucidate the extent to which Russian activities worsened America's divisions. It will then evaluate American foreign policy changes following the election to see if Russian interference helped secure any meaningful concessions.

Two main sources inform my analysis of Russian election interference. The first is officially titled “Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In the 2016 Presidential Election” (hereafter known as the Mueller Report). This document provides a thorough overview of Russian activity in the 2016 election and investigates allegations of Trump campaign collaboration with Russian actors. I also draw from the Senate Intelligence Committee Report (officially entitled “Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election”). This bipartisan document provides a detailed analysis of Russian efforts to interfere in the 2016 election and describes what steps could be taken to prevent such activity in the future.

### **Background: Political Context**

The United States has a long history of geopolitical competition with Russia. Although the end of the Cold War brought about improved relations, these gains have been largely reversed under Vladimir Putin’s tenure. Putin, who has continuously occupied the office of either president or prime minister since 2000, has sought to reassert Russia’s status as a great power capable of exerting hegemonic influence in its eastern European “near abroad” (Nalbandov, 8). Russian military spending has increasing accordingly, growing from 28 billion dollars at the beginning of Putin’s tenure to over 91 billion in 2015 (Rutland, 42). Putin has been a harsh critic of liberalism, arguing that a rules-based international order is nothing more than a ploy to increase American influence. Putin’s stated belief that “the collapse of the Soviet Union was biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”

contextualizes his overarching policy goals of strengthening Russia, restoring parity with the west, and carving out a Russian sphere of influence in eastern Europe (Nalbandov, 19).

Russia's intensified involvement in military conflicts in recent decades has also precipitated a confrontation with the United States and its allies. The first major crisis took place in 2008, when Russian forces intervened in the conflict between the Georgian military and separatist groups in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Böller and Werle, 322). Georgia's army was quickly pushed back and Russia quickly recognized the independence of the two breakaway regions, which remained occupied by Russian troops even after the cessation of hostilities (Böller and Werle, 322). The American response to this use of force was muted, with the Bush administration condemning Russia's actions but failing to implement sanctions (Böller and Werle, 322). The 2014 annexation of Crimea had a far more serious effect of US-Russian relations. The United States and its European allies harshly criticized this move and implemented economic sanctions against Russia (Böller and Werle, 323). They also intensified military cooperation with several eastern European states in order to deter further Russian aggression (Böller and Werle, 323). Russian interests have also clashed with those of the United States in the Syrian civil war. Russia intervened dramatically on behalf of Syrian dictator Bashar Al-Assad in 2015, using its air force to turn the tide of the conflict and prevent a rebel victory (Rutland, 43).

Russia's current practice of using information warfare can also be traced to the Cold War. Soviet intelligence operatives attempted to leverage divisions in American society in order to weaken the United States and undermine the appeal of liberal democracy more generally (Johnson, 210). Racial divisions were often exploited by the KGB, which alleged

government involvement in Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination (Johnson, 210). Soviet disinformation also falsely accused the United States of manufacturing the AIDS virus and encouraging the 1979 siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca while claiming that the CIA murdered President John F. Kennedy (United States, 82). Given that many observers have compared contemporary US-Russia tensions to the Cold War, it is perhaps unsurprising that Russia has drawn on Soviet disinformation tactics to further its geopolitical competition with the west.

Unfortunately, several characteristics of American society appear to have heightened its vulnerability to disinformation. On a structural level, modern social media platforms are ideal conduits for fake news due to their tendency to bring like-minded people together and present them with content that reinforces their existing views (Bovet and Makse, 1). The structure of social media networks allows fringe narrative can incubate within some isolated, homogenous, group whose members will be inclined to believe it. Due to its sensational nature, false news often spreads faster and more broadly than the truth while factchecking lags far behind (Bovet and Makse, 1). This problem may be exacerbated by extreme political polarization and widespread domestic discord.

### **Overview of Russian Interference in the 2016 Election**

Russia's efforts to interfere in the 2016 election consisted of three main activities: information warfare conducted through social media, cyberattacks and leaks of stolen documents, and efforts to compromise the integrity of voting systems (United States).

According to the Senate Intelligence Committee Report, these actions were carried out by several Russian intelligence agencies including the GRU (military intelligence), the FSB (domestic counterintelligence) and the SVR (foreign intelligence) (Uhlmann and McCombie, 681). The Internet Research Agency (IRA), a private St. Petersburg-based company owned by pro-Putin oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, was also heavily involved in information warfare activities (Uhlmann and McCombie, 681). It is important to note that Russian interference was opportunistic and decentralized, with little inter-agency coordination among the Kremlin's intelligence services. Indeed, the American intelligence community believes that both the GRU and the FSB independently compromised the DNC's servers and leaked sensitive documents that were damaging to Hillary Clinton (Uhlmann and McCombie, 682). This duplication of efforts suggests that Russian interference was not guided by any overarching master plan, but instead involved individual agencies exploiting weakness as they appeared.

### **Independent Variable: Russian Election Interference**

Russia's campaign to undermine trust in the 2016 election may have started as early as 2014, when several IRA operatives went on intelligence-gathering trips to the United States (Mueller, 21). This would mark the beginning of a concerted information warfare campaign that sought to undermine American democracy and stoke internal divisions. Overall, the intensity of Russian election interference was high and is coded as 4 on a scale from 0 to 6. Russian social media accounts purporting to represent American individuals or

organizations were viewed by tens of millions of Americans and were often quoted by public figures and mainstream media outlets. As such, the intensity of Russian information warfare online was coded as 2 out of 2. The intensity of Russian cyber warfare is also coded as 2 out of 2 due to the significant number of impactful, politically motivated cyberattacks that took place during the election. Finally, the intensity of Russian interference through traditional media is coded as 0 due to a lack of evidence that Russia employed such tactics.

The Internet Research Agency was one of the most prominent foreign distributors of disinformation in the 2016 election cycle. According to the Mueller Report, most of its activities involved fabricating online American personas that could spread disinformation or sow division while appearing to be real Americans (Mueller, 22). The IRA went to considerable lengths to make these “troll” accounts seem legitimate. Employees were told to create posts detailing the everyday lives and hobbies of their American alter-egos in an attempt to make fake accounts look like real people even upon close inspection (United States, 96). IRA operatives received extensive training on American culture and were required to study thousands of online posts in order to gain familiarity with the behavior of American internet users (United States, 99). IRA operations were extensive as well as sophisticated. The agency employed over 400 people as of 2015 and was active on nearly every major social media platform, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (Mueller, 22). This appears to be in keeping with Russia’s overall strategy of inundating a target with so many conflicting falsehoods that the very idea of objective truth is undermined.

Many IRA accounts achieved remarkable success in spreading the disinformation under the guise of legitimate American political discourse. The Senate Intelligence

Committee report highlights the Twitter profile @TEN\_GOP, an IRA account which purported to represent the Tennessee Republican Party. This account accrued over 150,000 followers before being taken down in 2017 and was retweeted by prominent conservative figures including Donald Trump Jr., Kellyanne Conway, and Micheal Flynn (United States, 54). The real Twitter profile of the Tennessee Republican Party (@tngop) was overshadowed by its Russian-sponsored counterpart and accumulated fewer than 14,000 followers as a result (United States, 54). The Mueller Report concludes that IRA social media accounts collectively “reached tens of millions of U.S. persons” (Mueller, 26). Individual Facebook groups such as “United Muslims of American”, “Being Patriotic”, and “Secure Borders” were each followed by over 100,000 American users (Mueller, 26).

The IRA also worked to take advantage of American political organizations. For instance, the IRA persona “BlackFist” hired a self-defense instructor to teach Black people how to protect themselves from law enforcement (Mueller, 32). Russian operatives also attempted, with varying degrees of success, to organize pro-Trump rallies in Pennsylvania, Florida, and New York (Mueller, 31).

The characteristics of IRA information warfare suggest that intensifying America’s internal divisions was a key objective for Russia. For instance, its operatives ran accounts on both sides of the political spectrum and often expressed views that were diametrically opposed to each other (United States, 34). Such behavior would be difficult to explain if promoting a particular candidate was Russia’s only goal. However, it seems quite logical as a tactic to make public discourse regarding contentious issues such as race, immigration, and gun control even more acrimonious. According to a 2017 Intelligence Community

Assessment, Russia even planned a campaign to delegitimize the results of the election both through official diplomatic statements and social media disinformation in the event of a Clinton victory (United States, 35). This suggests that undermining faith in American democracy was an important goal for Russian intelligence services regardless of the results of the election. Russian operatives also demonstrated a keen awareness of the controversies of American politics and made a concerted effort to target racial divisions (Johnson, 193). Indeed, the Senate Intelligence Committee Report found that African Americans more intensely targeted by IRA information operations than any other group (United States, 108). Although it is clear that Russia attempted to promote Trump and undermine Clinton, making American political discourse even more acrimonious was also an important objective.

The sophistication and wide reach of Russian information warfare efforts are sufficient for the intensity of information warfare to be coded as 2 (high). Russian disinformation was present on nearly every major social media platform and was viewed by tens of millions of American voters. Moreover, the messages of IRA accounts sometimes gained traction even in mainstream news sources when their statements were erroneously attributed to real Americans. The fact that some Russian social media profiles, such as @TEN\_GOP, were able to overpower their legitimate counterparts demonstrates the success of IRA disinformation in shaping the opinions of at least some Americans.

### *Russian Cyber Operations*

Russia complemented its disinformation campaign with cyber operations intended to undermine both Hillary Clinton and overall faith in the integrity of the election. The intensity



of Russian cyber warfare in the 2016 election is coded as 2 (high) based on the large number of politically motivated cyberattacks that were conducted by Russian intelligence services. According to the Mueller Report, the GRU compromised computer networks belonging to both the Democratic National Committee and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in April of 2016 (Mueller, 4). Russian operatives also gained access to the email accounts of dozens of Clinton Campaign volunteers and employees including campaign chairman John Podesta (United States 564). These hacking operations appear to have been sophisticated and far-reaching. The Mueller Report found that the GRU created two custom malware programs, referred to as “X-Agent” and “X-Tunnel”, in order to collect and exfiltrate data from the DCCC and DNC (Mueller, 38). In total, Russian intelligence officers were able to steal thousands of documents and emails from the DNC, DCCC, and Clinton Campaign (Mueller, 40).

GRU operatives made a concerted effort to disseminate documents stolen through these cyberattacks using the online personas “DCLeaks” and “Guccifer 2.0” (Mueller, 41). Both went to significant lengths to conceal their connection to Russia. DCLeaks claimed to be a transparency-focused group of American “hacktivists” who wished to expose the corrupt behavior of politicians (United States, 578). It’s website was purchased using bitcoin and registered using an anonymizing service in order to mask GRU involvement (United States, 579). DCLeaks remained active throughout the election cycle and its page was viewed over 1 million times before it was shut down in 2017 (United States, 579).

Guccifer 2.0 seems to have been created in response to allegations of Russian involvement in cyberattacks on the DNC and DCCC (United States, 583). The persona

claimed to be a lone Romain hacker and ultimately released thousands of stolen documents from democratic servers (Mueller, 43). Guccifer 2.0 also attempted to reach out to journalists in order to disseminate hacked materials, in some cases even providing access to DCLeaks resources (Mueller, 43). This behavior has led the American Intelligence Community to believe that DCLeaks and Guccifer 2.0 were both operated by the same group of GRU agents (Mueller 43).

Documents widely believed to have been stolen in Russian cyberattacks were also published on third-party sites such as WikiLeaks (Mueller, 41). According to the Senate Intelligence Committee Report, WikiLeaks actively collaborated with the GRU to promulgate stolen documents as effectively as possible (United States, 556). The timing with which these documents were released also appears to have been calculated to maximize political impact. On July 22, three days prior to the Democratic National Convention, WikiLeaks published a batch of over 20,000 documents that it had obtained from Russian sources (Lam, 2176). Many of these emails revealed damaging internal conversations, such as a discussion among Campaign officials regarding how to best undermine Bernie Sanders' bid for the Democratic nomination (Lam, 2177). On October 7th, a batch of emails stolen from Clinton Campaign chairman John Podesta was released by WikiLeaks a mere hour after news of Donald Trump's damaging comments on "Access Hollywood" came to light (Mueller, 5). The leaked documents included sensitive internal communications that appeared to be quite unflattering to the Clinton Campaign. For instance, participants in an email exchange that included Clinton's Communications Director insinuated that Catholicism appeals to conservatives due to "the systematic thought and severely backwards gender

relations” (Lam, 2178). On November 7th, the day before the election, WikiLeaks published thousands of additional DNC emails (Lam, 2178). Some of these were damaging to Hillary Clinton herself, suggesting that she may have violated ethical guidelines in attempting to solicit donations to the US pavilion at the 2010 World Exhibition (Lam, 2178). In short, WikiLeaks seems to have been implicated in an intense GRU effort to disseminate stolen hacked documents that would undermine Clinton’s legitimacy and electoral prospects.

Russian intelligence services are also alleged to have probed weakness in state voting systems (United States, 9). While there is no evidence that any votes were manipulated on election day (United States, 12), some experts have argued that by demonstrating its ability to access election infrastructure, Russia sought to undermine confidence in the integrity of the election (United States, 35).

Overall, the intensity of Russian cyber attacks is coded as 2 (high). This rating is appropriate in light of the fact that at least three cyberattacks observed by U.S. intelligence agencies had clear political implications and were not limited to intelligence gathering. On the other hand, there is no evidence to suggest that Russian activity had any direct impact on traditional media outlets in the United States, so intensity of foreign interference through mainstream media outlets is coded as 0. As previously stated, the intensity of Russian disinformation was coded as 2 (high) due to its prevalence on a large number of social media platforms and its ability to influence broader public discourse. Thus, the overall intensity of Russian election interference is coded as 4 out of 6.

### **Intervening Variable: American Internal Divisions**

Assessing the degree to which Russian election interference might have worsened American political and social divisions is a difficult task. This study finds that American internal divisions increased notably throughout the election and codes the intensification of such division as 3 out of 6. Specifically, the intensification of American political divisions is coded as 2 (high) and the intensification of racial tensions is coded as 1 (moderate). The intensification of political extremism is coded as 0 (low), given that there is little evidence to suggest an increase in extremist beliefs during or immediately after the election.

This study draws on public opinion polling to measure various aspects of political and social division within the United States. A wealth of available data suggests that in the wake of the 2016 election Americans were more divided than ever before. A Pew Research survey found that Donald Trump was historically unpopular as president-elect, with only 39% of respondents approving of his management of his transition to the White House and 41% approving of his high level appointments (Doherty, 1). These numbers were both lower than any results that have been recorded since 1989 (Doherty, 1). This widespread disapproval of president-elect Trump suggests that, in contrast to many previous elections, Americans did not come together even briefly to give their new leader a chance to prove himself. However, it is unlikely that Russian interference directly accounts for this hesitance to embrace president-elect Trump given that Russian disinformation focused on disparaging Hillary Clinton while depicting Trump in a positive light.

The Pew Research data also suggests that American opinion has become increasingly polarized with regard to Russia. In a January 2017 poll, 67% of Democrats and 41% of

Republicans agreed with a statement that “Russia’s ‘power and influence’ is a major threat” (Doherty, 2). On the other hand, a survey conducted in April 2016 found that only 37% of Democrats, but 46% of Republicans, agreed that “tensions with Russia” posed a major threat (Doherty, 2). There was also a wide partisan divide on the question of whether Russia was behind the cyberattacks on the Clinton Campaign and the DNC: 93% of Democrats thought that it probably or certainly was, in contrast with only 48% of Republicans (Kiley, 1). This provides evidence that the very occurrence of Russian election interference in the United States has helped drive a wedge between Americans of different party affiliations. Thus, intensification of American political divisions is coded as 2 (high) due to widespread controversy over the role Russia played in the election and acrimonious debate regarding how to respond.

Some evidence also suggests that racial divisions in the United States became more pronounced as a result of the 2016 election. A study conducted by Pew Research center found that, in November of 2016, nearly 75% of Americans expected Trump’s election to make race relations worse (Pew Research, 1). The same research found that American’s view of race relations became slightly more negative, with 56% of respondents in 2017 describing them as “generally bad” (Pew Research, 2). The intensification of racial divisions in the United States is coded as 1 (moderate). Although things did get somewhat worse during the election cycle, the divisions that arose were far from unprecedented. Moreover, the extent to which Russian efforts to exacerbate racial animosity actually affected race relations is unclear. Finally, there is no evidence to suggest that support for political extremism in the United States increased significantly in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 election. Although Donald Trump’s later

actions as president may have promoted extremist politics, this result cannot be directly attributed to Russian election interference. Some observers have claimed that the emergence of the fringe QAnon conspiracy theory in 2017 was encouraged in part by Russian information warfare (Menn, 1), but this effort seems to have been distinct from Russian election interference in 2016. Thus, the intensification of American political extremism is coded as 0. Overall, the intensification of America's internal divisions is a 3 out of 6, suggesting a moderate increase in these fractures.

### *Election Outcome*

Donald Trump shocked much of the world when he claimed an unexpected victory on November 8th. Although Clinton received approximately 2 million more votes than her opponent, Trump won the electoral college by 306 votes to 232 (Blair, 335). Turnout was quite low, with only 53.7% of eligible voters participating (Blair, 335). The election was also among the most divisive in American history, with both candidates inspiring widespread revulsion from the opposite side of the aisle through the campaign (Blair, 336). Allegations of Russian interference soon came to light in the aftermath of the election, leading President Obama to impose fresh sanctions on Russia in the waning days of his administration (Johnson).

### **Dependent Variable: American Foreign Policy**

Assessing American policy changes towards Russia in the wake of the 2016 election is a complicated endeavor. Although some of President Trump's actions and rhetoric seemed

to be favorable to Russian interests, there were also prominent cases in which his administration adopted a hawkish policy towards Russia. It is important to keep in mind that Trump's foreign policy was prone to rapid changes in disposition and a wide disparity between rhetoric and real-world actions. Overall, policy changes with respect to Russia were mixed but slightly unfavorable, and will be coded as -1 on a scale of -6 to 6. On one hand, new sanctions against Russia were implemented and old ones were maintained, leading to a moderate intensification of an unfavorable policy. Thus, changes in economic policy are coded as -1. The Trump Administration also shifted to a significantly more confrontational military posture towards Russia, so this aspect of foreign policy is coded as -2. However, the United States' diplomatic posture under President Trump was very favorable to Russia given that it undermined NATO and reduced America's prestige and involvement in global politics. As such, this metric is coded as 2.

Many of Trump's actions as president suggest a more confrontational military posture towards Russia. Perhaps most notably, the Nuclear Posture Review released by his administration advocated for the modernization of American nuclear forces and explicitly considered the implications of renewed great power rivalries with Russia and China (Cimbala, 111). It also suggested that a more flexible nuclear strategy, incorporating variable-yield warheads and a wide range of tactical delivery systems, was needed to deter potential adversaries (Cimbala, 110). This posture was likely interpreted by Russia as an aggressive policy that lowered the threshold for nuclear warfare and moved the world towards a dangerous arms race. President Trump also questioned the value of arms control agreements and claimed that "the United States has fallen behind on nuclear weapon capacity" (Rutland,

52). Some concrete actions, such as a move to withdraw from the Intermediate Nuclear Force Treaty, suggested that this was more than mere bluster (Sperling and Webber, 512). Thus, American nuclear policy under Trump seems to have become somewhat more assertive with respect to Russia.

America's conventional military posture also became somewhat more confrontational. Key high level appointees, such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis, National Security Advisors HR McMaster and John Bolton, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo were widely seen as national security hawks (Sperling and Weber, 514). Moreover, Trump raised military spending with a 54 billion dollar increase in the national defense budget (Rutland, 52). He also intensified American support for eastern European allies with a 2.5 billion dollar increase in funding for European Deterrence Initiative over his first 2 years in office (Sperling and Webber, 524). The United States also forcefully opposed Russian activity in Syria, launching a missile strike against the Assad regime in April of 2017 in retaliation for its alleged use of chemical weapons (United States 2018, 2). In a separate incident, American forces clashed with Russian mercenaries and are thought to have inflicted a large number of casualties (United States 2018, 2). Thus, the early years of Trump's presidency saw the implementation of a more hawkish national security policy towards Russia in both the nuclear and conventional domains. Overall, changes in American military posture are coded as -2, or highly unfavorable to Russia.

The United States also continued to impose sanctions on Russia, with a particular focus on Putin and his close associates. Congress passed the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, which levied new sanctions against Russia, with almost



unanimous approval (United States 2018, 5). By signing this bill into law, President Trump assented to a notable increase in American sanctions against Russia. Thus American economic policy changes with respect to Russia are coded as -1, or somewhat unfavorable.

However, other changes in America's foreign policy posture were likely welcomed by the Kremlin. Perhaps most importantly, Trump embraced a more transactional and isolationist view of international relations (Macdonald, 410). In pursuit of an "America First" policy, he moved quickly to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord and rejected the Trans Pacific Partnership trade agreement that his predecessor had worked to create (Sperling and Webber, 512). He also frequently expressed a belief that traditional US allies were taking advantage of American support to gain an economic advantage, leading some to question his commitment to upholding the existing international order (Macdonald, 409). Moreover, President Trump's belligerent rhetoric towards allies and seeming affinity for autocrats such as Rodrigo Duterte, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping may have played into Russia's hands.

The Trump administration also cast doubt on America's commitment to NATO. Trump was often a vocal critique of the alliance, calling it "obsolete" and complaining that it was ill suited to combating terrorism (Macdonald, 411). He also frequently complained that other members of the organization were taking advantage of the United States by failing to pay their fair share for the defense of Europe (Sperling and Webber, 522). At a meeting of NATO leaders in 2017, Trump refused to endorse the Article Five collective defense commitment that requires all NATO members to come to the aid of an ally that has been attacked (Sperling and Weber, 523). Overall, Trump's criticism of longtime allies, withdrawal

from global engagement, and skepticism of America's relationships with its allies likely damaged the international standing of the United States and gave Russia more room to maneuver in global politics. As a leader who has long objected to American hegemony and the liberal international order more generally, Putin was surely glad to see the United States withdraw from a global leadership role. Thus, changes in U.S. diplomatic alignment are coded as 2 (favorable to Russia).

The overall shift in American Russia policy in the aftermath of the 2016 election is coded as -1 out of 6, suggesting a mixed but slightly more hawkish approach. Although Trump's policies undermined U.S. alliances and isolated the country from the world, they did not usher in the drastic changes that some observers anticipated. The United States generally remained committed to defending its allies despite some rhetoric to the contrary, and its military stance actually became more hawkish due to an increase in defense spending and a nuclear posture geared towards great power competition with Russia and China. Moreover, the United States intensified sanctions against Russia and increased support for eastern European allies. Thus, policy changes under Trump were decidedly mixed and cannot be easily summed up as entirely positive or negative.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, Russian interference in the 2016 election was intense and multifaceted. Russian information warfare and cyberattacks both attempted to exacerbate American political divisions while undermining Hillary Clinton and promoting Donald Trump. Tens if not hundreds of millions of Americans were likely impacted in some way by Russian election

interference. However, it must be noted that domestic sources of misinformation were probably even more pervasive. Although it is difficult to say to what extent Russia contributed to Trump's victory, this study did find that foreign interference was somewhat successful in intensifying America's political and racial divides. This does not seem to have led to major foreign policy concessions to Russia. Moscow likely benefited from American withdrawal from global engagement and from the Trump Administration's skepticism towards alliances, international organizations, and trade. However, Trump's presidency also saw increased sanctions against Russia and a more assertive American military posture with respect to nuclear policy, defense spending, and involvement in proxy wars such as the Syrian conflict. Thus, Russian interference seems to have been at best ambiguously successful in terms of securing foreign policy concessions.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Taiwanese 2018 Local Elections**

In 2018, local elections across Taiwan were subjected to a foreign interference campaign that many claimed was unprecedented in scope and intensity. Two parties with radically different visions for the future of Taiwan contended for influence: the Kuomintang (KMT), which favors closer integration with the People's Republic of China, and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which promotes the development of a Taiwanese identity and the preservation of de-facto independence. The Chinese government has long sought to unify Taiwan with the mainland and views the DPP as a threat to its geopolitical interests. Seeking to undermine the DPP, the Chinese government encouraged the spread of misinformation on social media and traditional news platforms while simultaneously applying diplomatic and political pressure to weaken Taiwanese resistance to unification. This case study will outline the broader political context of China's confrontation with Taiwan, detail China's interference in the 2018 election, and evaluate the impact of this interference on Taiwan's foreign policy and internal political divisions.

#### **Background: Geopolitical Context**

The current tensions between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan can be traced to the Chinese Civil War, which began in 1927 and continued sporadically until 1949.

This conflict pitted the Nationalist Republic of China (ROC) against the Communist People's Republic of China (PRC). Following the victory of Communist forces, the Nationalist leadership fled to Taiwan and established a government in exile. Despite its limited power, this government claimed to represent the entirety of China (Dittmer, 1). On the other hand, the PRC asserted that it was the sole legitimate government of both mainland China and Taiwan. Incorporating the island into the PRC quickly became a key foreign policy objective of Chinese leaders (Lin and Zhou).

The United States has played a key role in preventing this outcome. Although American policymakers seriously considered abandoning Taiwan in the early 1950s, the Korean War convinced President Truman of the need to maintain a bastion against Communist influence in the region (Lin and Zhou, 179). Over the next few decades Taiwan received billions of dollars of American assistance and was afforded military protection through the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty (Lin and Zhou, 179). Even when President Nixon rescinded American recognition of Taiwan in favor of normalizing relations with China in 1971, the United States continued to insist that any reunification be accomplished peacefully (Lin and Zhou, 180).

Since 1979, China has adhered to a policy of "peaceful reunification" based on the assumption that its increasing economic clout and diplomatic influence would entice Taiwan to rejoin the mainland (Gries and Wang, 43). The PRC has attempted to enhance its appeal through the promotion of cultural exchange, cross-strait trade, and travel between the Taiwan and the mainland (Dittmer, 2). Some policies, such as a 2005 reduction of tariffs on Taiwanese agricultural produces, were specifically calculated to reward engagement with

China and demonstrate the value of closer economic integration (Wong and Wu, 356). Despite these efforts, recent events have called into question the assumption that time is on the PRC's side. Perhaps most importantly, the percentage of Taiwanese residents who consider themselves Taiwanese rather than Chinese has been increasing steadily since the 1990s (Dittmer, 3). The election of anti-unification President Tsai Ing-wen in 2016 put this trend in sharp relief and encouraged China to reevaluate its policy (Templeman, 87). The rise of Xi Jinping, whose legitimacy is in large part based on a narrative of China's ascendancy as a great power, has also driven the intensification of Chinese efforts to retake Taiwan. In short, the continued failure of peaceful incentives to bring about reunification, the restiveness of Chinese nationalists, and President Xi Jinping's desire to secure his legacy have led China to implement more coercive measures (Gries and Wang, 46).

In recent years, China has ramped up the pressure on Taiwan both diplomatically and militarily. It has successfully persuaded five countries to renounce their recognition of Taiwan since 2016, leaving only fifteen that maintain official diplomatic relations with the island (Gries and Wang, 42). China has also sought to isolate Taiwan by preventing it from participating in international bodies such as the World Health Organization (Gries and Wang, 42). These efforts have been accompanied, in part, by increased military posturing from Beijing. In 2016 and 2017 Chinese aircraft and naval units circumnavigated Taiwan in an unprecedented show of force (Gries and Wang, 45). Tensions were further increased in 2019 when Taiwanese airspace was violated by PRC fighter jets (Templeman, 87). President Xi Jinping has also implicitly threatened military action by warning that China will not "forsake

the use of force” (Gries and Wang, 41). Thus, Chinese behavior following the election of Tsai Ing-wen appears calibrated to increase the pressure on Taiwan to seek reunification.

There are currently two main political factions in Taiwan: the “pan-green” coalition led by the China-skeptic Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the “pan-blue” coalition led by the more conciliatory Kuomintang (KMT). The competition between these parties predates the establishment of democracy and remains highly contentious (Templeman, 89). The conservative KMT is a direct descendant of the nationalist government defeated in the Chinese Civil War, whereas the DPP can trace its origins to the opposition groups that agitated for political liberalization (Hsu et. al, 303). The DPP has officially favored independence since 1991, when Taiwan’s first free multiparty elections were held. (Hsu et. al, 303). Although the KMT once advocated for independence, it has shifted to a pro-unification stance since its defeat in the 2000 elections (Hok-wui Wong and Wu, 355). Today, these differences of opinion regarding cross-strait relations with China are considered defining characteristics of Taiwanese political factions (Hsu et. al, 301). Consequently, the Chinese Communist Party has strong incentives to promote the KMT in order to achieve its goal of reunification.

### **Independent Variable: Chinese Interference in the 2018 Elections**

The 2018 Taiwanese local elections marked an important inflection point in cross-strait relations. Although President Tsai Ing-wen was not on the ballot, these elections were widely considered to be an important indicator of her administration’s future prospects

(Wang, 68). The stakes were also high for China. Because Tsai's victory in 2016 had put the China-skeptic DPP in power, many mainland observers felt that a KMT win was necessary to keep their hopes of reunification alive (Gries and Wang, 42).

A widespread consensus has emerged that the 2018 election cycle was targeted by extensive Chinese election interference that attempted to undermine the credibility of the DPP. The intensity of this effort was high and coded as 4 on a scale from 0 to 6. Chinese disinformation was very prevalent online and some of the more successful false narratives were still widely believed on election day. As a result, the intensity of information warfare on social media platforms is coded as high (2). China also seems to have been quite successful at promoting its narrative through collusion with Taiwanese media outlets. Thus, the intensity of Chinese information warfare through tradition media sources is also coded as high (2). However, the PRC does not seem to have carried out any significant cyberattacks, so the intensity of cyber warfare is coded as low (0).

Evidence of China-sponsored information warfare has been provided in part by the Global Taiwan Institute, which found that false social media posts accusing Tsai Ing-wen's government of incompetence or malfeasance often originated in mainland China (Templeman, 89). Most notably, a story alleging that Tsai had toured regions damaged by flooding in an armored vehicle while being escorted by armed soldiers reached almost 85% of the Taiwanese electorate (Wang, 78). Although there was no truth to this claim, it was still believed by a significant portion of voters on election day. Moreover, its apparent credibility was boosted by doctored images and captions that were widely disseminated by mainland



social media accounts, which suggests that a concerted disinformation campaign was underway (Templeman, 89).

Indeed, Taiwanese investigators found substantial evidence of Chinese efforts to cultivate misleading narratives and incite hysteria. The Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau reported that sensationalist stories alleging that China planned to retake Taiwan by force in 2020 were being systematically spread by CCP-sponsored “online content farms” (Wang, 68). Moreover, exaggerated accounts of live-fire exercises carried out by the People’s Liberation Army were also disseminated in order to support this narrative and incite fear of an invasion should the DPP remain in power (Wang, 68). The *New York Times* and the BBC concurred with the Bureau’s findings, reporting that a “Russian-style influence campaign” was being deployed against Taiwan (Wang, 68).

Traditional media outlets also played a role in China’s disinformation campaign. The China Times Group, owned by the pro-unification Taiwanese billionaire Tsai Engmeng, unflinchingly portrayed China in a favorable light throughout the election cycle (Templeman, 88). The affiliated *China Times* newspaper, one of Taiwan’s oldest publications, offered detailed coverage of DPP infighting while failing to mention the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre or, later, the 2019 protests in Hong Kong (Templeman, 88). It has also been reported that editors at the *China Times* were in regular contact with the Chinese government, and that China secretly paid to place pro-mainland stories in various Taiwanese papers (Templeman, 89). Thus, it seems clear that the PRC’s disinformation campaign had a significant impact on traditional media outlets as well as more decentralized online forums.

The Chinese Communist Party complemented its efforts to undermine the DPP with support for various KMT candidates. The most notable beneficiary of this foreign intervention was Han Kuo-yu, a KMT mayoral candidate in the DPP stronghold Kaohsiung (Templeman, 90). Although Han was considered an unlikely candidate, his focus on economic issues and unconventional populist rhetoric propelled him to national prominence (Templeman, 90). However, his success may also have been facilitated by sympathetic coverage by pro-China media. More than half of China Times Group election coverage was focused on Han's candidacy, and significant numbers of mainland-based online groups also supported his campaign (Templeman, 90). Thanks in part to this enthusiastic foreign backing, Han became the KMT's most well-known candidate and enjoyed universal name recognition in Taiwan (Templeman, 90). On election day, Han pulled off a stunning upset victory, winning 54 percent of the vote in a perennial DPP stronghold (Templeman, 90).

In short, Chinese disinformation appears to have been quite successful in the 2018 elections. Some of the most prolific false stories promoted by the PRC reached more than 70 percent of the electorate (Wang, 80). Moreover, only about half of Taiwanese voters were capable of identifying the correct version of events even in well-publicized cases of disinformation (Wang, 80). Factchecking organizations were generally obscure, with clear majorities of Taiwanese voters lacking awareness of their existence (Wang, 81). Due to the pervasiveness of Chinese disinformation on social media, the intensity of information warfare online is coded as high (2). The intensity of information warfare through traditional media is also coded as high (2) due to the collusion of some of Taiwan's most influential news outlets with the Chinese government. Lastly, the intensity of cyber warfare against

Taiwan is coded as low (0) due to the lack of any well-publicized cyberattacks against Taiwanese election infrastructure. Overall, the level of hybridized election interference in this case was high and is coded as 4 out of a possible 6.

### **Intervening Variable: Taiwanese Internal Divisions**

It is hard to definitively determine the extent to which Chinese interference worsened internal divisions in Taiwanese society. Although Taiwan is widely considered to be a well-consolidated democracy, high levels of political polarization have been common for much of its recent history (Lee, 35). Moreover, partisan affiliation is closely associated with national identity: citizens who see themselves as Taiwanese tend to support the DPP, whereas those who consider themselves Chinese or both Chinese and Taiwanese generally prefer the KMT (Lee, 36). Despite these fault lines, Taiwanese voters on both sides tend to favor moderation regarding relations with China and are wary of dramatic changes to the status quo (Lee, 37).

The overall intensification of Taiwan's internal divisions was fairly low and was coded as 2 out of 6. The island's political divisions were significantly worsened due to controversy regarding the DPP's response to election interference. Even the question of whether interference occurred was the subject of bitter debate. As a result, the intensification of Taiwanese political divisions was coded as high (2 out of 2). However, there was no evidence to suggest increases in political extremism or racial tension, so both of these metrics were coded as low (0).

It seems clear that the topic of Chinese election interference was quite controversial following the 2018 election. Despite the occurrence of an intense disinformation campaign, only 48% of Taiwanese voters believed that interference took place. The remainder were either unsure or were convinced that there was no interference (Wang, 81). Some KMT commentators believed that the DPP exaggerated the threat posed by China in order to improve its political prospects (Hille, 2). Critics also charged that the DPP was using claims of Chinese influence to push through potentially repressive legislation. The KMT was particularly outraged by an “anti-infiltration” law designed to combat future election meddling and even claimed that it increased the risk of renewed military rule (Hille, 2). Thus, Chinese election interference seems to have significantly increased Taiwan’s political divisions. However, there was no evidence that the PRC’s campaign led to an intensification of political extremism or racial tensions.

It is also important to note that the promotion of internal divisions does not seem to have been a major objective of Chinese interference in the 2018 elections. Instead, China’s actions should be understood primarily as an effort to install a more friendly government in Taiwan by undermining the DPP while promoting KMT candidates. This interpretation is supported by the pro-China media’s glowing coverage of Han Kuo-yu, which makes sense in the context of promoting a specific candidate but would be difficult to explain if China’s goal was simply to sow discord and cynicism. Although Chinese disinformation often attempted to instill fear and paranoia, it accomplished this not by setting the Taiwanese people against each other, but by portraying the DPP as a reckless, radical, and inept organization bent on pursuing its agenda regardless of the cost to its constituents.

The degree to which China exacerbated Taiwan's internal divisions is coded as 2 on a scale from 0 to 6 due to significant political controversy regarding the DPP's response to Chinese information warfare. However, the value for this variable remains low given the lack of evidence that Chinese interference caused any additional divisions.

### *Election Outcome*

The Democratic Progressive Party suffered a major defeat in the 2018 election, retaining control of only 6 local offices out of the 22 that were contested (Chung-Min, 78). Tsai Ing-wen's approval rating at the time of the election was below 20% and the DPP overall received only 39% of the vote (Chung-Min, 78). However, due to the fact that these elections were strictly local in nature, Tsai Ing-wen remained in power and her party retained control of the national legislature. This allowed the DPP to formulate a robust response to Chinese interference.

### **Dependent Variable: Taiwanese Post-Election Policy**

Chinese success in promoting local KMT candidates failed to bring about foreign policy concessions to the mainland regime. Because only local offices were contested in the 2018 election cycle, the DPP retained control over both the presidency and the legislature (Templeman, 94). As a result, Taiwan's foreign policy became significantly more hawkish towards China. This change was coded as -3 on a scale from -6 to 6. Changes in the island's diplomatic posture were highly unfavorable to China, with Tsai Ing-wen forcefully rejecting

the prospect of reunification under a “one country, two systems” framework. Thus, this metric was coded as -2. Changes in Taiwan’s economic policy towards China were also somewhat unfavorable and are coded as -1. Finally, no major changes occurred in Taiwan’s military posture, so this metric is coded as 0.

Following the 2018 elections, the pan-green coalition implemented several policy changes intended to curb illicit Chinese influence. In an effort to increase transparency, the DPP used its legislative majority to require that all registered political parties issue annual financial statements (Templeman, 94). More dramatically, the DPP was also able to push through a new “anti-infiltration” law that made it a criminal offense to influence elections on behalf of “overseas hostile forces” (Hille, 1). Residents of Taiwan were prohibited from accepting money from such actors or from acting according to their instructions (Bailey, 227). The law also curtailed foreign lobbying and political donations (Bailey, 227). The DPP argued that this legislation was necessary in light of China’s efforts to subvert Taiwanese democracy and its apparent willingness to forcibly annex the island (Hille, 1). However, the anti-infiltration law was nevertheless divisive, with the KMT warning that it would give the government unchecked powers, pose a threat to innocent people, and even risk a return to martial law (Hille, 2). The Taiwanese bureaucracy also increased its scrutiny of people and organizations linked to the PRC. Government procurement of Chinese communications technology was halted, fines for falsifying documents to illicitly import Chinese products were increased, and Taiwanese citizens who held PRC residence cards were barred from running for public office (Templeman, 95).

In addition to these efforts to curb Chinese influence, Tsai Ing-wen also doubled down on her pro-independence foreign policy in 2019 when she pointedly rejected the 1992 consensus in a public statement (Lai, 178). In the same statement, Ing-wen explicitly rejected the “one country, two systems” framework that China proposes as a model for unification (Bailey, 226). Her position on this issue seems to align with Taiwanese public opinion. Indeed, rejection of “one country, two systems” is nearly universal, with several polls showing that as many as 90% of Taiwanese oppose such an arrangement (Bailey, 226).

Overall, it appears that Taiwanese policy towards China became *more* hawkish despite the seemingly successful interference campaign conducted by the PRC. Changes in Taiwan’s diplomatic posture towards China are coded as -2, or highly unfavorable due to Tsai Ing-wen’s forceful rejection of reunification on China’s terms. The implementation of a robust anti-infiltration law that cracked down on avenues of Chinese influence and limited some forms of interactions between Taiwan and the mainland contributes to this coding. Changes in Taiwan’s economic policy were also somewhat unfavorable to China. The island took steps to limit imports of Chinese goods and cut back on purchases of communications technology from the mainland. This withdrawal from economic interaction is coded as -1. Finally, Taiwan’s military posture presents a mixed picture. Although president Tsai Ing-wen promised to improve military readiness in January 2020, no major changes have been implemented and many observers consider Taiwan to be unprepared for conflict (Gries and Wang, 49). Therefore, Taiwan’s military posture is coded as 0 (no change). Overall, Taiwanese foreign policy changes are coded as a -3 on a scale ranging from -6 to 6. This suggests a moderately more assertive foreign policy towards China.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, it seems clear that China conducted an intense and far-reaching intervention campaign in Taiwan's 2018 local elections. Information warfare, conducted through traditional TV and news outlets as well as social media "content farms", was a key component of this effort. Although the PRC's election interference seems to have successfully promoted KMT candidates, it appears have had a fairly limited effect on Taiwan's internal divisions. It is probable that intensifying these divisions was only a secondary objective for China. Moreover, Chinese election interference clearly failed to extract any foreign policy concessions from Taiwan. Thus, although China's preferred political faction did well in this case, the CCP's ultimate goal of unification may not be any closer.



## Chapter 5

### The United Kingdom 2016 EU Membership Referendum

On June 23, 2016, a narrow majority of United Kingdom citizens voted to withdraw their country from the European Union (Goodwin and Heath, 323). This outcome stunned many observers and catalyzed sweeping changes in Britain's economic and political relationship with Europe (Campello, 1). However, critics have charged that the 'Brexit' vote might not accurately reflect the public will, alleging that foreign actors attempted to influence the referendum. In 2019, the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee concluded that Russia engaged in "unconventional warfare" against the UK during the campaign (McGaughey, 334). This case study will explore the political context in which the Brexit Referendum took place and examine the extent to which Russian interference played a role in the outcome. It will then analyze changes in the UK's internal divisions throughout the campaign. Finally, changes in Britain's foreign policy following the referendum will be evaluated.

#### **Background: Political Context**

The United Kingdom first joined what would eventually become the European Union in 1973 (Wall, 3). A referendum held in 1975 confirmed this decision, with 67% of voters supporting continued membership (Goodwin and Heath, 1). However, the UK was frequently

a reluctant member of the European community. Many of its citizens expressed concern that European institutions could limit the sovereignty of the British government and thus opposed closer integration (Adam, 20). The United Kingdom's reluctance to tie itself too closely to the rest of Europe was highlighted by its decisions to remain outside the Schengen free movement zone and to retain the pound rather than adopt the Euro (Zyla, 58). Moreover, British policymakers often tended to favor relations with the United States over relations with Europe (Zyla, 60).

In the first two decades of the 21st century several events led an increasing number of British citizens to become disillusioned with the European Union. The 2008 financial crisis had a serious impact on the stability of the Euro, reinforcing the conviction of many UK voters that their country needed to maintain an independent fiscal policy (Adam, 40). In 2015, the EU struggled to find a solution to the dramatic influx of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa (Zyla, 67). These factors, combined with an increasing belief among conservatives that the EU was undemocratic and economically uncompetitive, helped fuel the rapid rise of Euro-skepticism (Adam, 39). The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) provided the most dramatic illustration of this trend, winning more representatives to the EU parliament than any other UK-based party in 2014 (Campello, 6). Though the party was created in 1993, its popularity began to rapidly increase starting around 2010 (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley, 118). By 2015, it was a major political force (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley, 118).

The 2016 referendum was initially proposed in 2013 by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, who promised as part of a campaign strategy that Britain would hold a

referendum on EU membership should his party win the 2015 general elections (Campello, 6). Although Cameron opposed leaving the EU outright, he believed that he could renegotiate the terms of the UK's participation and achieve a better deal while retaining the benefits of EU membership (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley, 2). Specifically, he sought to ensure fair terms of trade between Britain and the Eurozone countries, bolster the EU's competitiveness by cutting costs for businesses, exempt Britain from closer integration with other EU members, and impose limits on migration into the UK (Wall, 282). He also hoped that the referendum would undermine support for the UKIP, which posed an increasing political threat (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley, 8). However, it appears that in some cases Cameron's expressions of discontent with the EU merely strengthened the UKIP's argument that Britain should leave the union (Wall, 282).

### *Russia and the European Union*

Relations between Russia and the European Union have often been characterized by competition and misunderstanding in recent years. Following the collapse of the USSR, many policymakers in the EU and the United States assumed that Russia would liberalize and move towards closer relations with the west (Ornstein, 11). However, since 2007 Russian president Vladimir Putin has adopted a more confrontational stance (Ornstein, 14). He became an increasingly harsh critic of the western-led liberal world order and decried the fall of the Soviet Union as "the major geopolitical disaster of the [20th] century" (Kanet, 14). Since the mid 2000s, Russia has sought to mitigate the effects of this "disaster" by establishing a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe (Nitoiu, 150). As a result, it has become

increasingly resentful of the EU's attempts to expand into former soviet states and promote democratization in Eastern Europe (Kanet, 15).

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a key turning point in its relationship with the EU (Casier, 1). Prior to the invasion, Ukraine had seemingly been on track to sign an exclusive Association Agreement with the EU, which would have been a key step towards membership in the union (Kanet, 20). Thus, Russia's military actions were interpreted as an attempt to prevent an expansion of EU influence as well as a violation of international norms. Relations between the European Union and Russia quickly declined to a level not seen since the Cold War. (Casier, 1). The United Kingdom, one of the strongest advocates for a robust response, called for the expulsion of Russia from the G8 and a boycott of the Sochi Olympics (Johnson, 42). The EU also imposed a wide range of sanctions on Russia, which were soon met with Russian counter-sanctions against European food imports (Kanet, 20). Overall, the relationship between Russia and the EU was characterized by intense competition at the time of the Brexit referendum, and Moscow had strong incentives to weaken the EU's political cohesion if it could find a way to do so.

### **Independent Variable: Russian Election Interference**

The extent to which Russia intervened in the 2016 Brexit referendum is a matter of some controversy. Though it seems clear that Russian state-controlled media outlets had significant reach and were biased in favor of Brexit, it is harder to determine the intensity of Russian social media-based disinformation in this case. This study codes the intensity of

Russia's information warfare on conventional media platforms as 1 (medium), whereas the intensity of information warfare online is coded as 0 (low). The intensity of Russian cyberattacks is coded as 0 (low) given that no such attacks are known to have been conducted with political motivations. Thus, the overall level of Russian interference is coded as 1 out of 6.

There is significant evidence that Russia attempted to promote the Leave Campaign through the use of state-controlled traditional media outlets. As a result, the intensity of Russia's conventional media disinformation is coded as 1 (medium). The two most prominent state-controlled Russian news companies, Sputnik and RT, both displayed a clear anti-EU bias in their reporting (House of Commons, 70). The DCMS report found that pro-Leave articles published by Sputnik and RT may have reached up to 130 million people (House of Commons, 70). The main pro-Leave websites appear to have had a smaller audience, with 44 million people viewing content from Vote Leave and Leave.EU collectively (House of Commons, 70). A study by the Oxford Internet Institute also found some evidence of Russian influence in the referendum, noting that approximately 0.6% of tweets with Brexit hashtags linked to Russian sources (Kuchler and Ram, 1). Taken together, this evidence suggests that Russian media was at least somewhat successful in influencing the Brexit debate.

Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook may also have been conduits of Russian influence. Unfortunately, there is little hard evidence to definitively support or refute claims of Russian disinformation campaigns on social media. A study conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute found 105 Russian troll accounts that collectively tweeted around

16,000 times prior to the election (Kuchler and Ram, 1). However, the researchers stressed that this was an insignificant amount of activity compared to Russia's well-documented intervention in the 2016 US presidential election (Kuchler and Ram, 1). On the other hand, research carried out at the University of Edinburgh suggests that Russian accounts involved in the American election may have been repurposed to target the Brexit Referendum (Llewellyn et. al, 1152). Out of 2,752 accounts identified by Twitter as participants in Russia's effort to undermine the 2016 presidential race, 419 appear to have posted Brexit-related content in a cumulative 3,485 tweets (Llewellyn et. at, 1148). Moreover, these accounts were observed to intensify their activity on the day of the referendum, which suggests a calculated effort to influence the vote (Llewellyn et. al, 1153). However, it is important to note that the number of tweets identified by this study is minuscule in comparison to the overall volume of online discourse regarding Brexit. Although it is possible that additional Russian activity escaped observation, it seems that interfering in the Brexit referendum was a low priority for Russia. Thus, the intensity of Russian disinformation on social media is coded as 0 (low) despite the irrefutable existence of some such disinformation.

There have also been allegations that Russia worked with the wealthy British entrepreneur Arron Banks to illicitly contribute money to the Leave Campaign (Wright, 1). According to the DCMS Report, Banks' is thought to have donated approximately 8.4 million pounds to Leave.EU (House of Commons, 74). This is believed to be the largest contribution to a political campaign in British history (House of Commons, 74). The Electoral Commission, which serves as an election watchdog in the UK, claimed that it had

“reasonable grounds to suspect” that Banks was “not the true source” of these funds (Wright, 2). Banks is known to have meet with Russian Embassy staff in London on several occasions, raising the possibility that he may have colluded with the Kremlin to bankroll the Leave Campaign (House of Commons, 74).

Overall, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which Russia intervened in the Brexit campaign. The limited available sources suggest that Russian state-controlled media such as RT and Sputnik deliberately supported Brexit and reached a significant audience. Thus, Russian interference on traditional media platforms is coded as 1, suggesting a moderate level of activity. While there is some evidence that Russia attempted to spread disinformation on social media to some extent, there is no widespread consensus that this activity was significant. Moreover, only a very small number of Russian accounts were discovered attempting to influence the Brexit referendum. Although it is impossible to rule out a broader, undiscovered, intervention, existing evidence suggests that the intensity of Russian social media disinformation should be coded as 0 (low). Finally, there is no evidence of Russian cyberattacks aimed at influencing the Brexit vote, so the intensity of Russian cyber warfare is also coded as 0. Thus, the overall intensity of Russian election interference in this case is coded as 1 out of 6, suggesting a low but non-negligible level of interference.

### **Intervening Variable: Internal Divisions**

The 2016 Referendum resulted in a narrow but nevertheless shocking win for Leave, with approximately 52% of voters opting to withdraw from the European Union (Goodwin

and Heath, 323). Turnout was the highest it had been in decades, with over 72% of the electorate casting a vote (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley, 1). The surprising Leave victory destroyed the political future of David Cameron, who resigned the office of Prime Minister and was replaced by fellow conservative Theresa May (Campello, 55). The United Kingdom's new leader soon moved to withdraw from the European Union, which marked the beginning of a complicated and contentious exit that would take years to unfold.

Internal divisions in the United Kingdom appear to have intensified during the Brexit campaign. Because the referendum did not provide a clear outline of how Britain should leave the EU, the issue of what kind of Brexit to pursue became a contentious question. Moreover, the campaign appears to have intensified divisions within some of the main political parties and contributed to increased anti-elite populism. As a result, the intensification of political divisions seems to have been high and is coded as 2 out of 2. However, there did not appear to be any increase in political extremism despite the fact that more radical parties such as UKIP were the most enthusiastic supporters of Brexit. Increases in racial animosity also seemed to be minimal. Thus the intensification of the United Kingdom's internal divisions is coded as 2 out of 6, suggesting a relatively low increase.

The Brexit referendum appears to have significantly intensified Britain's political divisions. Both the Conservative and Labor parties were divided on the issue of Brexit, with demographic factors such as age, race, level of education, and geographic location becoming better predictors of voting behavior than party identification (Goodwin and Heath). This division persisted in the aftermath of the vote, with Theresa May struggling to maintain unity between her party's "hard Brexit" and pro-Remain factions (Adam, 128). She was often



unsuccessful in this endeavor and her government had great difficulty in building a parliamentary majority that would support any particular Brexit plan (Adam, 129). This suggests that the referendum may have exacerbated some internal divisions by disrupting the existing partisan alignment and ushering in a turbulent period of adjustment.

The vote to leave the European Union also seems to have reinforced a trend towards divisive, anti-expert populism. Many voters seemed to be remarkably ill-informed and made their decisions on the basis of emotions and “gut instinct” rather than any coherent understanding of the choices presented to them. Indeed, on June 24th, the day after the referendum, the most commonly searched question on Google in the UK was “what is the EU” (Adam, 109). Pro-Leave politician Michael Gove summed up the prevailing sentiment among many voters when he declared that “the people of this country have had enough of experts” (Adam, 90). The outcome of the referendum seems to have vindicated this claim, with a majority of voters opting for Brexit despite the fact that nearly 75% of the House of Commons opposed the idea (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley, 5). Indeed, only 148 members of parliament out of a total of 650 voted to leave the European Union (Goodwin and Heath, 324). This put the United Kingdom’s legislature in the unusual position of having to implement a policy which it opposed by an overwhelming margin.

In addition, Brexit significantly exacerbated political divisions between different parts of the UK. Although the overall vote was very close, regions such as Scotland and Northern Ireland voted decisively to remain (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley, 150). In light of Scotland’s previous consideration of independence from the UK in 2014, the triumph of a policy which its voters opposed by a 24 point margin may encourage it to seek independence.

The Scottish National Party's announcement in 2016 that it would seek another independence referendum suggests that Brexit may have undermined the political cohesion of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland presents an even more serious problem. The Good Friday Agreements that brought an end to the conflict between Irish nationalists and unionists are contingent upon having a minimally obtrusive border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the island (Adam, 212). Brexit threatened to make this boundary an external border of the EU, thus significantly worsening political divisions in the region.

In short, the Brexit referendum appears to have significantly intensified Britain's political divisions. It encouraged increased polarization within some of the main political parties, fueled the rise of populism, and may risk creating divisions between different regions of the UK. As a result, the intensification of political divisions during the Brexit campaign is coded as high (2 out of 2). However, neither racial tensions nor political extremism appeared to increase as a result of Russian interference. Although the once-fringe UKIP party did become more influential, this process was already well underway even before the Brexit referendum. Moreover, the mainstream conservative party was able to remain in power following Brexit, albeit under new leadership. Thus the intensification of Britain's internal divisions is coded as 2 out of 6, suggesting a relatively low but significant increase.

### **Dependent Variable: British Foreign Policy**

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU marked a crucial inflection point in the country's role in the world. Proponents of Brexit contended that leaving the union would

enable Britain to more freely pursue an independent and globally oriented foreign policy (Oppermann, Beasley, and Kaarbo, 138). However, many others expressed concern that the UK would find itself isolated economically and militarily while having a less influential voice in European affairs. The potential effects of Brexit were equally unpredictable for the European Union. The referendum marked the first time when the EU experienced a major decline in size and economic power (Jacobs, 7). The United Kingdom's withdrawal also diminished the EU's global influence, depriving the union of its most powerful military and one of its largest economies (Zyla, 86). However, some optimists argued that the EU, no longer held back by a perennially reluctant member, may be able to pursue closer integration (Jacobs, 3).

Although the long term implications of Brexit remain a topic of active scholarly debate, the immediate effects of the referendum appear to have been beneficial to Russia. By leaving the European Union, the UK entered a new era of uncertainty and experienced a decline in its political influence and economic prosperity. Thus, the changes in Britain's diplomatic alignment ushered in by Brexit were highly favorable to Russia, and are coded as 2 out of 2. However, the United Kingdom's military posture remained largely the same despite its withdrawal from the EU. As a result, changes in this aspect of foreign policy were minimal and were coded as 0. Finally, the United Kingdom's economic policy towards Russia did not undergo any major changes as a result of Russian interference in the Brexit referendum. Thus, the United Kingdom's foreign policy changes are coded as somewhat favorable to Russia (2 out of 6).

The Brexit referendum catalyzed changes in the United Kingdom's diplomatic alignment that were highly favorable to Russia. Although a narrow majority of the British people opted to leave the European Union, the 2016 vote did not provide any specific details regarding how this should take place or what kind of relationship Britain should subsequently seek with the EU (Adam, 130). This resulted in a considerable degree of chaos and uncertainty as Theresa May's government attempted to articulate a plan for Brexit. The issue of the border between Northern Ireland (which is part of the United Kingdom) and the rest of the island became especially problematic. This boundary had been kept open since 1973 in order to limit conflict between Irish nationalists and British unionists (Adam, 142). However, maintaining this arrangement after Britain left the EU proved to be a serious diplomatic challenge (Adam, 142). The United Kingdom also gave up much of the significant influence it once enjoyed as one of the EU's largest and most powerful members (Jacob, 87). As a result, Britain may risk being influenced by EU policies over which it has no control.

The economic impact of Brexit was also unfavorable to the UK. Prior to the referendum, annual trade between Britain and the other 27 EU member states totaled 491 billion dollars and accounted for nearly 20% of the UK's GDP (Stevović, 45). The critical importance of this economic interaction put Prime Minister May's government under a great deal of pressure to secure favorable terms of trade with the EU. UK policymakers also hoped to offset any economic losses incurred by Brexit by negotiating new trade deals. However, efforts to accomplish this met with limited success as potential partners such as Japan were quick to indicate that they prioritized their economic relations with the EU (Oppermann, Beasley and Kaarbo, 139). British economic markets were also temporarily destabilized by

Brexit, with notable indices of economic uncertainty spiking to 4 times their baseline values in the immediate aftermath of the referendum (Campello, 6). To make matters worse, the long term economic consequences of Brexit could be severe, particularly in crucial sectors, such as finance, which rely heavily on access to European markets (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley, 176). Even non-EU trading partners such as the United States may reduce their economic interactions with the UK given that it no longer offers such proximity to the European market (Campello, 21). Although it is still too early to conclusively evaluate Brexit's economic impact, current projections suggest that it could cost the UK 1.5 to 4 percent of its GDP by 2030 (Stevović, 61). Thus, Brexit seems to have come at a significant economic cost.

The United Kingdom's military posture seems to have changed relatively little in the aftermath of Brexit. At the time of the referendum, the United Kingdom possessed one of the largest and most capable militaries in Europe and accounted for 25% of the EU's total defense spending (Zyla, 88). Although this led to some concerns that the EU would face a shortfall in defense capabilities, the UK stated in 2017 that it remained unconditionally committed to maintaining European security (Zyla, 85). The United Kingdom also remained a key member of NATO, providing it with a framework to continue participating in military collaboration with many other EU states (Johnson, 4). Thus, Britain's military posture remained mostly unchanged following the Brexit referendum.

The United Kingdom's economic policy towards Russia also appears to have remained constant following the Brexit referendum. No major changes in either trade or sanctions took place as a result of Russian interference. Although the poisoning of former

Russian spy Sergi Skripal on British soil in 2018 did lead to worsened relations between the two countries, this was not attributable to Russian election interference and is thus outside the purview of this study.

Overall, Brexit caused changes in the UK's diplomatic alignment that were costly in both political and economic terms. The country lost the significant influence it enjoyed in the EU and gave up unrestricted access to its markets. This had substantial short term economic impacts and may prove to be very costly in the future. Moreover, the UK has failed to extract any meaningful benefits from the "independence" that many of its voters expected from Brexit. Thus, the referendum significantly weakened the UK's position, playing into the hands of a Russian government that wishes to see the west divided. Changes in Britain's diplomatic posture were thus highly favorable to Russia and are coded as 2 out of 2. On the other hand, changes in the United Kingdom's military posture were very limited and the country remained committed to defense cooperation with the EU. As a result, this metric is coded as 0 (no change). British economic policy towards Russia also appears to have been unaffected by Russian interference in the Brexit referendum. Thus, the United Kingdom's overall change in foreign policy towards Russia was somewhat favorable to Moscow's interests and is coded as 2 out of 6.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, Russian interference seems to have encouraged a Leave victory in the 2016 Brexit referendum. Russia's efforts to promote a pro-Brexit narrative through state-controlled outlets such as RT and Sputnik appear to have been quite successful. Indeed, these sources

likely reached more voters than the official Vote Leave website. Moreover, Russia may have provided illicit financial support to pro-Brexit campaigners through the businessman Arron Banks and others. There is substantial evidence that this Russian interference intensified the United Kingdom's internal divisions by helping to fuel the rise of divisive populist politics. The referendum was also highly regionally polarized, with Scotland and Northern Ireland overwhelmingly supporting Remain. Thus, the result of the Brexit referendum may have weakened the UK's territorial integrity in addition to increasing its political divisions. The aftermath of the Brexit campaign saw Britain implement a foreign policy that generally favored Russia. By withdrawing from the EU, the United Kingdom weakened its economic prospects and lost the significant political influence that it had possessed as a member of the union. In short, Russia's interference in the Brexit referendum appears to have accomplished its goals of weakening the UK and dividing the west despite its limited intensity.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Analysis and Conclusions**

This Independent Study investigated the impact of hybridized election interference campaigns on democratic societies. Drawing on existing hybrid warfare literature, it identified election interference as a key instrument of hybrid aggression that is becoming increasingly relevant as a result of new technological developments. The study evaluated two main hypotheses: (1) hybridized election interference will lead to an intensification of internal divisions within states that experience it, and (2) the intensification of these internal divisions will make a state more likely to make foreign policy concessions to the intervener. This chapter will describe the results of the study, evaluate both hypotheses, and discuss some notable cross-case trends. It will then situate these findings in the existing literature and propose some ideas for future research.

### **Overview of Results**

This study investigated three cases where democratic states were subjected to election interference in varying forms. The 2016 American presidential election and the 2018 Taiwanese local elections both experienced intense interference that featured a high level of online information warfare. However, there were some qualitative differences between the two cases, with cyberattacks complementing Russian information warfare in United States



and traditional media outlets severing as important conduits of Chinese disinformation in Taiwan. The level of election interference in both of these cases was coded as high (4 out of 6). I found that interference in the 2016 “Brexit” referendum seemed to be far less severe. Russian meddling was mostly limited to information warfare through state-controlled media outlets, and the intensity of election interference was coded as low (1 out of 6).

Each of the countries studied seemed to experience an intensification of its internal divisions during and immediately after its election. The United States saw the largest increase, which was coded as moderate (3 out of 6), and both Taiwan and the United Kingdom experienced a lower increase (2 out of 6). However, the findings on foreign policy concessions were less uniform. American policy changes were coded as slightly unfavorable to Russia (-1) and Taiwanese changes were coded as moderately unfavorable to China (-3). This suggests that both states became more hawkish, although the change in Taiwanese foreign policy was much more pronounced. On the other hand, the United Kingdom’s policy changes were coded as somewhat favorable to Russia (2).

#### *Hypothesis 1: Election Interference and Internal Divisions*

This study supports the hypothesis that hybridized election interference causes an intensification of a state’s internal divisions. All three states that were examined in this study seem to have experienced at least some increase in such divisions during and immediately after their respective elections. However, there does not appear to be a strong correlation between the intensity of election interference and the worsening of internal divisions in a state. The United States and Taiwan, which were both coded as cases with high levels of

interference (4 out of 6), both appear to have experienced moderate intensifications of their internal divisions (3 out of 6 and 2 out of 6 respectively). However, internal divisions also seem to have increased moderately in the United Kingdom (2 out of 6) despite the low intensity of Russia election interference (1 out of 6). Thus, although it seems clear that election interference exacerbates a country's internal divisions, the extent to which this occurs is not entirely dependent upon the intensity of the interference.

This reason for this seemingly weak correlation might be understood by examining the differences between Chinese and Russian behavior. China's intervention in Taiwan's 2018 elections appears to have been motivated by a desire to promote the comparatively pro-mainland KMT party. Much of the propaganda spread by China was intended to portray the mainland and its favored candidates in a positive light rather than encourage cynicism and disenchantment with politics (Templeman, 90). The glowing coverage given to KMT candidates such as Han Kuo-yu would be difficult to explain if promoting discord was Beijing's primary goal. Although Chinese interference appears to have intensified Taiwan's internal divisions, this does not seem to have been a major goal of the PRC.

On the other hand, Russian interference in the United States clearly focused on fueling division. The Senate Intelligence Committee Report details the efforts of Russian operatives to create personas on both sides of contentious issues such as immigration and race relations (United States, 34). On some occasions these "troll" accounts were even observed to argue against one other. This behavior seems to make little sense as part of an effort to promote a candidate but may be logical as part of a campaign to intensify political divisions. Russia's plans to delegitimize the results of the 2016 election in the event of a

Clinton win further underscore Moscow's interest in worsening America's internal divisions. Although it is more difficult to determine Russia's specific goals in the United Kingdom, it seems reasonable to imagine that its tactics were similar in both cases even if the intensity of its efforts differed. Thus, the seemingly disproportionate effect of Russian election interference on internal divisions may be explained by Russia's focused attempts to promote them.

### *Hypothesis 2: Internal Divisions and Foreign Policy Changes*

The hypothesis that internal divisions will cripple a state's ability to conduct an assertive foreign policy was not supported. Indeed, both countries that experienced intense election interference adopted a more assertive policy towards the intervener despite their internal political troubles. This shift was the most evident in Taiwan, which initiated a crackdown on Chinese influence and moved to distance itself from the "1992 consensus" touted by mainland China as a framework for reunification. Taiwanese foreign policy changes were thus coded as -3, suggesting a moderately more assertive foreign policy. This is not particularly surprising given that president Tsai Ing-wen, whose party was a target of Chinese interference, remained in power after the 2018 election. However, concessions to an intervener are not guaranteed even its preferred candidate wins. Although Donald Trump undoubtedly benefited from Russian interference in America's 2016 presidential election, the policies that he enacted were in many respects more hawkish towards Moscow than those of his predecessor and were coded as -1.

A variety of factors could explain why intensified internal divisions do not seem to prevent states from implementing assertive foreign policies. One possibility is that, even in democracies, the will of the people is rarely reflected in foreign policy decisions. In many cases, matters of diplomacy are simply a low priority for the majority of voters, who are more concerned with domestic policy debates or hot-button “culture war” issues. As a result, foreign policy decisions can be made by career bureaucrats who are less influenced by day-to-day political controversies. The activities of Russia’s Internet Research Agency appear to reflect an awareness that inflammatory rhetoric regarding race, immigration, or religion attracts far more attention than a discussion of the United States’ approach to foreign policy. Thus, internal divisions might have a serious impact on a state’s ability to implement domestic policy without impeding the ordinary course of foreign policy decision-making.

It is also possible that intensified internal divisions undermine effective foreign policy implementation over the long term. Such divisions could raise the stakes of political competition to the point where previously respected norms regarding the political neutrality of the armed forces and intelligence services are undermined. The extension of partisan warfare to these organizations would encourage elected officials to staff them with political loyalists rather than experienced professionals. The budgets and activities of the foreign policy bureaucracy may also become mired in the same hyper-partisanship that currently paralyzes debates over immigration and climate change in many western countries. This degradation of apolitical professionalism may not occur over the course of a single administration, but it could eventually cripple a nation’s ability to implement foreign policy.

Only time will tell if this proves to be the case in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Taiwan.

### **Analysis of Key Trends**

This study found several interesting trends across the three cases that were examined. Firstly, the question of whether election interference occurred was a source of controversy in all three countries that were targeted. Moreover, the magnitude of this controversy seems to directly correlate with the intensity of the interference. The United States and Taiwan both experienced intense partisan debate over the extent to which election meddling occurred, with the side alleged to have benefited from such interference being reluctant to acknowledge that it happened even in the face of compelling evidence. The debate over Russian interference in the “Brexit” referendum was notably less acrimonious but nevertheless prompted accusations that Theresa May’s government failed to investigate Russian activities from which it may have benefited (House of Commons). This lack of consensus on the basic question of whether interference took place seems to have complicated targets’ efforts to respond.

The highly controversial and political nature of responding to and attributing blame for election interference gives rise to a vexing problem for democracies: the very occurrence of foreign intervention almost always intensifies internal divisions. The more impactful and well-known the interference, the more political polarization it will tend to create. Of course, this is probably only true up to a certain point. Sufficiently brazen interference may convince

politicians on both sides of the aisle that a robust response would be politically expedient. Thus, a state using election interference to fuel a target's internal divisions should calibrate its activities to be noticeable but plausibly deniable, thus increasing the odds that any response will become mired in acrimonious partisan politics. Some have alleged that Russia acted in this manner in the 2016 election, deliberately allowing its attacks on state voting systems to be discovered in order to sow discord (United States, 35). To combat such tactics, states experiencing election interference may benefit from playing down allegations of foreign meddling unless they can be quickly substantiated with irrefutable evidence.

It was also notable that foreign actors leveraged the internet and social media platforms in order to spread disinformation in all three instances of election interference. This trend was particularly notable in Taiwan and the United States, with significant portions of both electorates being influenced by online "fake news". There is also evidence to suggest that Russian troll accounts attempted to influence the Brexit vote, although the extent of this activity remains unclear. Intriguingly, both China and Russia appear to have employed social media accounts purporting to belong to citizens of the countries they were targeting. These accounts were then used to inject disinformation into public discourse. In many cases, this disinformation was amplified by prominent political figures or news organizations, greatly amplifying its effect. The central role of online disinformation in the election interference campaigns examined in this study supports the claim that modern technology has significantly increased the threat posed by election interference.

One surprising observation was that the country whose post-election policy changes appeared most beneficial to foreign adversaries was the one that seemed to experienced the

least election interference. The intensity of Russia's intervention in the UK's "Brexit" referendum was coded as low (1 out of 6) and was the least severe instance of election meddling observed in this study. Nevertheless, the United Kingdom's foreign policy changes following the referendum were quite favorable to Russia and were coded as 2 on a scale of -6 to 6. This suggests that states seeking to promote certain policy changes would do well to keep their intervention discreet. Although brazen election interference campaigns do not seem to inspire a broad backlash, it could be that retaliation from the faction harmed by such behavior outweighs the support of the faction that benefited. This seems to have occurred in Taiwan, where the DPP's unfavorable reaction to Chinese interference was far more notable than any concessions offered by the KMT.

### **Conclusions**

This study contributes to a substantial body of scholarly literature pertaining to hybrid warfare. Many of its findings appear to provide support for key concepts advanced by hybrid warfare theory. Although scholars have proposed various definitions of hybrid warfare, they largely agree on the importance of several key ideas. The implications of this study for some of the most salient claims of hybrid warfare theory are discussed below.

Hybrid warfare theory posits that states may employ a mixture of conventional and non-conventional tactics to aggressively pursue foreign policy goals while remaining below the threshold of full-scale war. Thus, hybrid warfare is conceptualized as an alternative to both excessively costly armed conflict and potentially ineffectual diplomacy. This study

seems to support such a conceptualization. For instance, Chinese election interference in Taiwan clearly appeared to be part of a larger campaign of hybrid warfare that involved economic, diplomatic, and even military coercion. Although PRC leaders have expressed a willingness to use military force, it seems that a hybrid strategy has allowed them to avoid the high risks and negative diplomatic responses that war would entail. China's behavior in this case seems consistent with trends identified by Weichong Ong and Alessio Patalano, both of whom argued that the PRC has been building up a range of hybrid capabilities to enhance its power in the Asia-Pacific region. Overall, this study supports the claim that hybrid warfare provides state actors with powerful alternatives to more conventional tactics.

Another idea advanced by the majority of hybrid warfare theorists is that states use hybrid tactics in order to cultivate ambiguity. Some, including Jens Ohlin and Darin Johnson, have even highlighted the ability of election interference to exploit ambiguous legal regimes and thus complicate retaliation. This study appears to support the idea that ambiguity plays an important role in hybrid warfare campaigns. In each case of election interference, the difficulty of proving that foreign meddling took place seemed to encourage controversy over how to respond. Although the United States and Taiwan were able to implement some policies in response election to interference, these actions were controversial in both countries and failed to deter further acts of hybrid warfare. Thus, the difficulty of proving allegations of election interference seems to protect interveners from a robust response.

Many hybrid warfare theorists such as Vepkhvia Grigalashvili and Kęstutis Kilinskas specifically highlight the importance of information warfare and cyber operations in hybrid warfare. They argue that these tactics provide state actors with a low-risk, high-



impact means of undermining an adversary. This study supports these claims. Information warfare appeared to play a major role in every instance of election interference that was investigated for this research. Moreover, the internet and social media platforms often provided key conduits for foreign disinformation. Cyber operations also seem to have played a major role in Russia's election interference campaign against the United States. Taken together, this information suggests that hybrid warfare has been rendered significantly more effective by modern technology. This may help explain the seeming discrepancy between the recent development of hybrid warfare theory and the long history of hybrid tactics in the international arena.

This study participates in an ongoing scholarly debate regarding hybrid warfare theory. Many hybrid warfare scholars such as Frank Hoffman suggest that hybrid conflicts will involve the use of military force in some form. Others, including Patryk Babiracki and Mitchell Ornstein, have contended that hybrid warfare theory can be applied to purely political conflicts as well. Although Hoffman's conception of hybrid warfare seems to be more applicable in cases such as Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, the election interference campaigns examined in this research suggest that hybrid warfare does not require a military component. Russia's election meddling in the United States provides the best example of non-military hybrid aggression. It featured several key components of hybrid warfare, including multimodality, ambiguity, and the collaboration of state actors and non-state entities such as the Internet Research Agency. It was also distinguished from many instances of more "traditional" election interference in that it was primarily motivated by a

desire to weaken its target. Thus, hybrid warfare continues to be a meaningful concept even in cases where military force is not used.

Moreover, conventional forces may not need to participate in combat in order to play a role in hybrid warfare. For instance, China appears to have used its military to intimidate the Taiwanese populace and support its portrayal of the DPP as a threat to the peace and security of Taiwan. This deployment of military assets for the purposes of information warfare underscores the flexibility and ever-evolving nature of hybrid warfare.

#### *Potential Shortcomings of Hybrid Warfare Theory*

Although hybrid warfare theory provides a powerful framework for understanding modern geopolitical conflict and competition, this study hints at a few potential weaknesses of the concept. Most importantly, it identifies a very wide range of behaviors that could be considered acts of hybrid warfare. For instance, the relatively limited information warfare that took place in the United Kingdom seems very different from the far-reaching campaign of intimidation, economic pressure, and election interference deployed against Taiwan. Critics such as Bettina Renz may argue that the concept of hybrid warfare loses its meaning when it can be applied to so many different situations. Moreover, skeptics of hybrid warfare are clearly right to caution that it is not a universally effective approach to foreign policy. Though some instances of election interference do secure foreign policy concessions, others, such as Chinese meddling in the Taiwanese local elections, fail to produce their intended effects. Thus, it would be a mistake to assume that hybrid warfare is a panacea to the foreign policy challenges facing state actors.

However, this study generally supports the conclusion that hybrid warfare theory provides useful insights. It is clear that many states employ coercive tactics, including information warfare, election interference, and cyber attacks, that fall below the traditional threshold of war. This behavior, which occurs outside the framework of both diplomacy and conventional armed conflict, seems to be an increasingly common feature of modern geopolitical competition. Though hybrid warfare theory is not perfect, it explains the multimodal, ambiguous, and flexible nature of contemporary conflict better than any current alternative.

### *Election Interference*

Although this study is primarily grounded in hybrid warfare theory, it also engages with the ongoing scholarly discussion of election interference. In their book *Rules and Allies: Foreign Election Interventions*, Johannes Bubeck and Nikolay Marinov contend that there are two broad types of election interference: candidate interventions that seek to aid specific friendly politicians, and process interventions that aim to change the “rules” of the election (Bubeck and Marinov, 45). They also argue that states seeking to impact the results of an election may combine both of these tactics in order to maximize their influence. This study supports the claim that there are different kinds of election interference that can be usefully distinguished from each other. For instance, China’s attempts to promote the KMT in Taiwan can be understood as classic candidate interventions. On the other hand, Russia’s election interference in the United States seemed to combine a process intervention designed to sow discord with a candidate intervention intended to promote Donald Trump. However, it is

important to keep in mind that this instance of election meddling is distinct from those studied by Bubeck and Marinov in that it was part of a larger campaign of hybrid warfare. Overall, this study suggests the need to distinguish election interference campaigns intended to promote a certain election outcome from those intended to sow discord.

### *Ideas for Future Research*

There are several interesting possibilities for future research regarding election interference. Although this study posited that an increase in internal divisions should lead to more political controversy regarding foreign policy, it could be the case that intensified political competition encourages actors to “outbid” each other by taking a hard line towards potential adversaries. It is also possible that even leaders who benefited from foreign election interference may seek to distance themselves from accusations of collusion by adopting an assertive foreign policy towards the alleged intervener. Intensified political divisions and louder complaints of election meddling may make such a tactic more attractive. Investigation of these possibilities could help elucidate why election interference did not seem to cause significant foreign policy concessions.

Additionally, future research could address the question of how hybrid warfare campaigns change over time. Can hybrid warfare evolve into full scale military conflict? This question seems particularly relevant in the case of Taiwan, which the PRC has vowed to seize by force if necessary. It certainly seems possible that Chinese hybrid warfare against the island could be recalibrated to weaken its resolve and willingness to fight in preparation for an invasion. On the other hand, perhaps hybrid warfare could play a role in the continuation

of “frozen conflicts” in which conventional hostilities have ceased. Investigation of these questions could lead to the development of new models of international relations in which binary distinctions between war and peace are replaced with a more nuanced “sliding scale” of conflict intensity.

Future research could also investigate the long term implications of election interference. Although this study found that foreign interventions increase the intensity of a state’s internal divisions, it is still unknown how long these divisions persist. Perhaps controversies inflamed by foreign actors fade away fairly quickly, but it is also possible that they can become longstanding political schisms. Some interveners may attempt to promote the latter outcome through continued activity in the aftermath of an election. Thus, a longer-term study of election interference campaigns may provide some useful insight into their role as a tactic of hybrid warfare.

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